



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON DR. MARDA STEEDMAN SANBORN, GUEST PREACHER
THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 27A, NOVEMBER 12, 2023
AMOS 5:18-24; PSALM 70; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18; MATTHEW 25:1-13

FAITH IN ACTION: JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS

Life in Christ: Hope, Love, Prayer

Amos 5:18-24 [*Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*]

“Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: Alas for you, who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went in the house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake.”

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning? Are you feeling uplifted? Imagine my reaction when I first looked at the scriptures appointed for today? I pondered where are we headed following the magnificence of the celebration of All Saints, baptisms and the remembrance of our own baptismal vows? I want you to consider for a

moment what all of this means to you. How does our worship speak to you and in what ways are you drawn into the presence of God? Is it the words of the liturgy or the power of the preaching of the word or the beauty of the music or the mixture of all of it, that keeps you coming back week after week or is it something else? Perhaps the words of a parent long since ingrained as habit. Is it passion or obligation or desire? Have you even thought about it? Amos is basically telling us that worship in and of itself isn't enough if we ignore justice and righteousness. God in Christ challenges us to let justice flow down like waters and give

righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Justice and righteousness are gifts of God - and Amos suggests God's expectation is that these become manifest to others through us. So how are we doing? Many of us like to have an orderly life with a regulated, dependable rhythm and pattern while others enjoy a more random and eclectic style with surprises and twists and turns. Our relationship with God can bring us to a place of balance. My parents and the church provided a framework of values and beliefs to guide my actions and behaviors, but I still had the freedom to map the course I would follow. When I was growing up, the country moved into an era of change and while every generation can say that we experienced racial riots, antiwar demonstrations on campus, Martin Luther King's I have a Dream speech, the assassination of President Kennedy and civil unrest and much of what had not been seen in our homes was evident in the daily news on our tv screens. Today we hear of shootings almost daily and home invasion robberies. We watch with horror what is happening in Ukraine and Palestine and hear of what is happening to our synagogues and our Jewish and Moslem friends locally. As a child I watched programs like the Twilight Zone where the end of the program left you hanging. There were unanswered questions. I realized that life itself had many unanswered questions and that one of the ways one might respond to all that was happening around us was by faith. Realizing that we are the instruments of justice and peace and the ability to offer reconciliation and love to others was and is within our ability as members of the body of Christ. The gift of forgiveness is empowering. Rod Serling was the Creator/host of the Twilight Zone and one of his quotes has stayed with me: There is "A sickness known as hate. Not a virus, not a microbe, not a germ --- but a sickness nonetheless,

highly contagious, deadly in its effects. Don't look for it in the Twilight Zone --- look for it in the mirror. Look for it before the light goes out altogether." We can make a difference, but this is a choice.

It seems that no matter where we are, we are being watched or filmed by traffic cameras, dashboard cameras, store security cameras etc. Can you stretch your imagination to consider that our loving Creator is also watching over us, also aware of our actions, thoughts, and cares deeply for us? Sometimes we know that we are being filmed and sometimes we are unaware. Maybe more importantly we don't often think about who may see the results of those films. On the news recently some adults were caught on doorbell cameras who ran up to peoples' houses on Halloween and stole their candy including the bowls and then ran off. Contrast this with two youths who arrived at a neighbor's home on Halloween, also caught on a doorbell camera, and discovered the bowl was empty. They looked at each other and together decided they should take candy out of their bags and fill the bowl. The neighbor recognized the boys and told their parents because they were moved by the fact that these boys cared so much that younger children might be disappointed who might come after them. The boys' parents were interviewed and were pleased their boys' demonstrated values that had been taught. As parents we hope our children internalize the values we teach and model, yet what is their behavior like when we are not around? What is our own behavior like when no one we know is watching? Christ is always with us. We are confronted with situations every day and we are compelled to respond, and we do - based on the course we have set for ourselves.

We all long to hear a good word that speaks to our heart and that will sustain us, giving us both

courage and wisdom to make it through another day, a reminder that God is with us and that we are not alone.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy clearly made a powerful impression on the Thessalonians, that Christ's return was imminent but at the same time, left them perplexed about what would happen to those who died before Christ returned. The Thessalonians also worried about themselves: what if they died before Christ returned? What would happen then? They were taught that true peace and security are found in God, not in the strength of Rome, but they had to be reminded that their hope was in Christ. In this context the imagery in the text is the vision of Christ coming down from heaven, a shout of command, the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ rising first and then those alive in Christ rising. In truth, it is not these exact details that are important. Generations have since passed and we still don't know when Christ will return. What is important is that in life and in death the Christian is in Christ and that is a union which nothing can break. It is about relationship, the relationship we have with and in Christ and with one another. Yes we have the apocalyptic imagery, but we also have the encouragement we receive from one another; the practice of praying without ceasing, learning to live in the presence of God; discovering ways of giving thanks, regardless of circumstances; in not becoming complacent, but keeping alert so that we might discern what it means to live by the grace and peace of Christ and to hold to what is good and abstain from evil. These are choices we make every day.

None of us knows everything that we will experience in our journey of faith. We know that Christ promises to be our companion along the way but also promises that others will be with us

on the journey. Personal Prayer will sustain us as does the prayers of others and hope is ever present when answers are long in coming.

In Matthew's Gospel, the parable opens with a familiar phrase, "The kingdom of heaven will be like this." The kingdom is like the whole scene portrayed by this parable where some bridesmaids are prepared for the groom and enjoy the banquet while others are excluded by their own lack of preparation. This kind of bridal event is still prevalent today in Palestine.

Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one has an immediate and local meaning and a wider and universal meaning. In its immediate significance it is directed against the Jews. They were the chosen people; their whole history should have been a preparation for the coming of the Son of God; they ought to have been prepared for Him when He came. Instead, they were unprepared and were shut out. Here in dramatic form is the unpreparedness of the Jews. But the parable has at least two universal warnings: It warns us that there are certain things which cannot be obtained at the last minute. It is far too late for the student to be preparing when the day of the examination has come. When I was doing my master's degree we had the option of taking our final exam during the final term or waiting until the end of the term. Three of our cadre decided to take the final early. We knew there would be a research question on the exam and that they would present a series of questions to be researched in advance and that no notes could be used during the exam and citations would be required to support your research. During the final one of my colleagues tapped on her paper and swore under her breath obviously frustrated. The other I learned later had decided to take the opposite viewpoint of the research question to disprove it. The professor called me

after the exam to say since I was the only one of our cadres that passed in our division, an announcement would be delayed but she wanted me to know I had passed. Preparation is everything. It is too late for one to acquire a skill, or character, if they do not already possess it, when some task offers itself to them.

Similarly, it is easy to leave things so late that we can no longer prepare ourselves to meet with God. Matthew's text warns us that certain things cannot be borrowed. The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil when they discovered they needed it. One cannot borrow a relationship with God when they need it. They must possess it for themselves. One cannot borrow character; they must be clothed with it. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. There are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves; we cannot borrow them from others.

When my brother left for duty during the Viet Nam War, my mother gave Michael a small pocket New Testament and told him not to be ashamed to rely on it. I still remember the letter home in which he told my mom that that Bible saved his life, there was no explanation. The next letter included a photo of his uniform and the New Testament in the pocket with a bullet in the middle of it where he had been hit by enemy fire. Several months later his squadron was sleeping inside a circle of their motor vehicles when Michael felt a heavy thud hit him in the chest. He quickly rolled onto his stomach and began to count for what seemed an eternity. He whispered to the man next to him to hurry and get the commander. When the Sergeant arrived, Michael whispered to him, and the rest of the men were quickly awakened and cleared out of the immediate area while a tactical team carefully rolled my brother over and packed the grenade that had landed on his chest into special material

all the while praying none of them would set it off. They discovered that yes it was a live grenade, but the pin had bent when it was pulled. Michael's only thought at the time was to have as few men as possible die with him at that moment. He knew his decision would impact everyone around him and only had a split second to choose what he would do.

This next story highlights the importance of shared fellowship, companionship and trust in one another and the conviction that we are our brother's keeper: My brother Michael was expecting a friend from out of town and received a call at 2 am saying they had arrived but needed help finding the address. Michael said he would come and guide them. As he did so on I-405 my brother made a sudden rapid acceleration and swerved and veered off the freeway. His friend driving behind him, turned to his wife and immediately said "I Don't know why he did that but I'm going to follow him!" The wrong way drunk driver only caught a small portion of the rear bumper of my brother's friend's vehicle, and no one was killed. Michael's friend told his wife, "I learned to trust him with my life in Viet Nam and I knew he would do it again." Michael earned the V for Valor as a Marine for saving 6 men, this friend was one of them. Let us be thankful for our men and women who serve.

We develop our relationship with Christ over time, over our lifetime. We are continually becoming who God in Christ created us to be. Let us walk in the light of His love and reach out to one another in love and generosity with peace and grace.

Amen