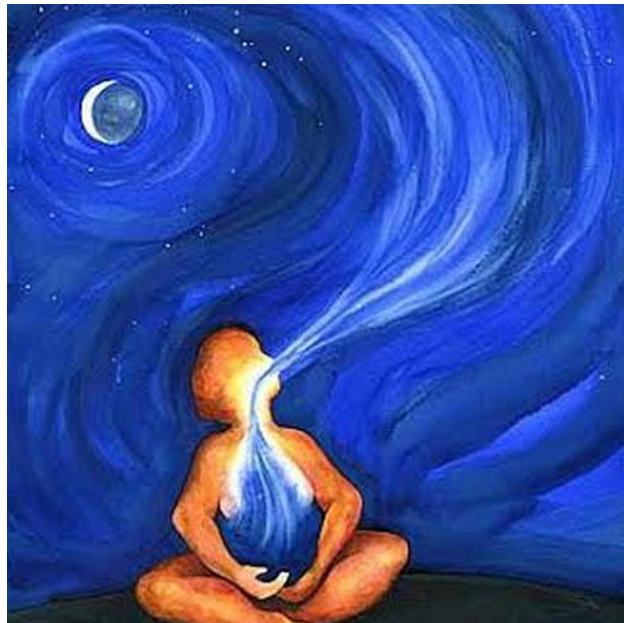




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 17, 2019
MALACHI 4:1-2a; PSALM 98; 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13; LUKE 21:5-19

SAYING YES TO GOD



There is an apocryphal story about an American student of philosophy who traveled to Asia to explore the eastern religions. In Japan, she engaged a Japanese scholar and asks him to explain some of the complexities of Shinto and Buddhist belief. The Japanese scholar at first demurs. But the American persists; and finally the scholar does his best, thoughtfully if a bit reluctantly, to peel back a few layers.

The American listens carefully, taking copious notes, and as the Japanese scholar concludes, she declares with a satisfied smile, “Now I understand completely!” The Japanese scholar frowns, and says, “then I must have explained things poorly.”

The scriptures appointed for today reminded me of this story, and if, after this sermon, you understand them perfectly, then I will have

failed miserably. These are apocalyptic passages from our scriptures. It is important to remember that the word “apocalypse” has come to portend cataclysmic disasters or to presage doom, but the word simply means reveal what has been previously hidden. Apocalyptic literature reveals some truth, but in elliptical ways.

Our youth have a bible study each month, and they selected these readings for this Sunday to discuss recently. I understand that they found them troubling, and difficult to understand. And I would say, right on, they are not meant to be straightforward, or easily understood. We wrestle with them, and they speak truth to us, even as they remain shrouded in deeper mystery that we will not likely “understand perfectly” in this life.

But perhaps we can peel back a few layers and glean some kernels of value this morning.

In service to that cause, I’d begin by saying these readings found their way into our Sunday lectionary a long time ago, when our church calendar had a 40-day season of penitence and preparation before the Feast of Christmas. Similar to the forty days of Lent before Easter, this Nativity Fast, as it was called, was intended as a period of purification so that we might be spiritually ready to receive the wondrous gift of the Incarnation of God into the world. This was the first Sunday of that season, telescoping all its purpose onto Christmas and the gift it is to all the world.

More recently we in western Christianity have seen fit to adapt the Season of Advent,

as we call it now, to be four weeks instead of forty days. We’ve moved from the penitential color of violet/purple (spilled blood) to Sarum blue in honor of Mary, who said yes to God, and leaned into the pregnant hope that God was breaking into the world in new, surprising and life-giving ways. We focus less on penitence and fasting, but it is still a season of preparation.

Next Sunday after the morning services we will host an Advent Event, an opportunity to explore several of the ways we observe Advent in our homes, as intentional ways to prepare for Christmas.

Advent is just the Latin cognate of the Greek word Parousia, which intends the Second Coming of Christ in power and great glory, which is what today’s gospel references. From the earliest days, our tradition has held fast to an expectation that this Second Coming will happen in the fullness of time, that we cannot predict its timing, but we can prepare ourselves for it.

Whether in the older more ascetic Nativity Fast, or in the more prevalent modern form of gestational preparation in Advent, there is a hope born in it all that Christ will break into our lives anew and heal the world and us of our brokenness. And our work is to be vigilant, lamps trimmed, fastidious in focus on what is important in life. And ultimately that is what these readings are all about—how we live and move and have our being in light of those expectations we have of God, and God has for us.

Gift giving at Christmas originally was about almsgiving with no expectation that the recipient would ever know who gave the gift. Read about the real Santa Claus who offers a different model of gift-giving worthy of emulation.

We have a plethora of Advent daily devotional resources in print and on-line that are designed to help us hold the space in a different way, with intentional focus on prayer. Advent calendars and other resources share the stories of our tradition that enable us to lay claim to a genealogy of spiritual ancestors that guide us in this work and inspire us along the way.

This isn't just meant to be sweet things for children to enjoy. In the wisdom of our tradition, all this has developed over time to assist us as practitioners of the faith so that we might be better able to discern what is really important in life, and what is *adiaphora*—another Greek word meaning, non-essential. There is a lot about modern life that is *adiaphora*.

In this passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus is saying the gilding of the temple will not inoculate it from destruction. Indeed, by the time Luke's gospel was written, the temple in Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble. Some day this cathedral building will fall to the ground—hopefully not in our lifetimes, right?!—and Jesus is saying, stay focused. That doesn't mean we neglect the building which serves a purpose in our mission, but it is not the point of it all.

The writer to the Thessalonian church has some pretty tough directives to the community—anyone among you unwilling to work should not eat. The counsel is actually a bit more nuanced than that—if there are some in your midst who are idle and disruptive—*ataktos*—busybodies who spend their time stirring the pot rather than working for the good of the whole, then don't take their energy on. Don't give them a platform for their disruptive ways. Stay focused on what matters. Every community will have folks who fill this role, just don't let them divert you from your spiritual practices. Seems like wise counsel for us all, whether in the church or any system.

We claim spiritual practices here, as community, and invite each person to embrace them in ways that help you stay focused, to prepare. These spiritual practices include: pray daily, worship weekly, learn constantly, serve compassionately, give generously, observe Sabbath time, and make pilgrimage. These are tried and true practices that help equip us to face whatever comes our way in life, and they help hone our sensory skills to discover God in our lives moment by moment. The practice of Presence.

Spiritual practices are not some moral code of doing the right thing, scoring points with a scorekeeping God. Measuring morality is a superficial veneer; spiritual practices are designed get down in our bones, changing our very matter. They ground us, and they are the means by which we put down deep roots

in a tradition that connects us to our spiritual ancestors in wonderful ways.

We need not understand it all perfectly; we let the mystery of God linger in our lives in the hopes that God might touch us in ways we cannot ever fully understand, but when presented with the possibility, we might just have our wits about us to say, Yes. Yes to God and to our true selves.

Glory to God who can do infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Luke 21: 5-9 *[When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."*

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13 *[Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.*

ⁱ <https://beherenownetwork.com/ram-dass-ep-98-spiritual-practices/>