

SERMON

STARTERS

Julie Faith Parker

November 3, 2002

All Saints Sunday

Rev. 7:9-17; Ps. 34:1-10, 22

1 Jn. 3:1-3; Mt. 5:1-12

Always Blessed

Every pastor knows that Bible comes in all shapes, sizes, colors, and versions. When I encounter an unfamiliar translation of the Bible, I turn to today's Gospel lesson as my litmus test. How do the translators render *makáριοι* in the beloved Beatitudes? Is it "happy" or "blessed"? If the Bible reads, "Happy are those who mourn . . .," I confess to feeling a little irked. I worry that such a Bible tries too hard to cater to us.

So much of our American culture focuses on individual happiness. Advertisers bombard us with messages that the hot cars, cool clothes, and smooth drinks will make us happy. "I just want to get into a good college and be happy," rationalizes the student who cheats on an exam for better grades. "I just want to follow my heart and be happy," explains the husband who dumps his long-standing loyal wife for someone new. Too often, we sanction our selfishness under the guise of "happiness."

But Jesus knows that faith, like life, is about more than always feeling good. Throughout the Beatitudes, he reminds us that we are blessed when we stay true to God. Our days bring struggles—we may mourn, we may feel meek, hungry, thirsty, or be persecuted—but God is with us. And, even when our life stories are not

tidily tied up with "happily ever after," God gives us the blessed assurance of steadfast love.

November 10, 2002

24th Sunday of Pentecost

Josh. 24:1-3a, 14-25; Ps. 78:1-7;

1 Thess. 4:13-18; Mt. 25:1-13

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

To choose what we will do with our lives is an extraordinary privilege. Many of us take this freedom for granted as we constantly make decisions. Most of these choices are pretty mundane ("What should wear today?" "What will I eat for breakfast?"), but some are monumental ("What career path should I choose?" "Should I marry this person?") In today's Old Testament lesson, Joshua confronts the people of Israel with a momentous decision.

Joshua asks the Israelites to choose whom they will serve—Yahweh or other gods. At first glance, this seems like a no-brainer. Sure enough, right on cue, the people resoundingly respond that they will serve Yahweh. They even recite reasons for their choice, recounting Yahweh's mighty acts of the Exodus. Why wouldn't they serve this God?

Joshua tells them why not. This is not a warm, fuzzy, kind of deity. This God means business. If you turn to idols, you will pay the price. Once appraised of the risks, the people still agree, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey" (v. 24). And so the repeated judgment of the Israelites throughout their history comes down to this question: are they obeying God? As promised, rewards pour forth when they do, and punishment hits hard when they do not.

What rewards or blessings overflow in our lives when our decisions reflect a desire to serve God?

And when we choose to turn away from God, what price do we pay?

November 17, 2002

25th Sunday of Pentecost

Judg. 4:1-7; Ps. 123 or Ps. 76;

1 Thess. 5:1-11; Mt. 25:14-30

Everything Ventured

Don't you think the parable of the talents is a bit harsh? In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells about three slaves entrusted with their master's money while he goes away. The first servant gets five talents, the second gets two talents, and they trade the money, earning profits. The third servant, however, prudently hides the money, then returns it. In exchange for his well-intentioned efforts, this hapless slave is berated as worthless and tossed into the outer darkness to have his teeth gnashed. And Jesus tells us this story to illustrate the kingdom of God?!

With this parable, Jesus asks us to choose which slave we want to be. The master, of course, is God, who gives each person precious opportunities. You and I are most like the first slave in the generosity of resources that have been doled out to us. While we may not consider ourselves rich, we need to remember that one fifth of the world's population earns less than one dollar a day. In comparison to the rest of the world, Americans are fabulously wealthy. And as we recognize our privilege we need to acknowledge that it brings responsibility.

The parable of the talents sets a choice before us and teaches us to take risks in giving ourselves back to God. To help us do this, the church acts as an agent of God's grace, offering us precious opportunities to return back to God from God's generous goodness. Throughout our lives, when we give of ourselves we discover that when we venture everything, we have everything to gain . . . even the kingdom of God.



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November 24, 2002
26th Sunday of Pentecost
Ezek. 34:11-16, 20-24; Ps. 100
Eph. 1:15-23; Mt. 25:31-46

A Joyful Noise

As Advent begins next week, preachers and congregants often join in a familiar lament. What has happened to Christmas? How did it get so commercial? How might we counter the tyranny of consumer culture at this sacred time?

Perhaps one answer lies in Psalm 100. As the spirit of Methodism shines through in its glorious hymns, so too did the spirit of Israel find expression in its cherished Psalter. Like a hymnal, the Psalms remain a treasure trove of worship resources for personal and public devotion. Both ancient and modern worshippers are exhorted to "Worship the Lord with gladness" and "come into God's presence with singing" (v. 2).

Too often in our worship, we fail to sing like we mean it. We mouth the words from our hymnals, but forget to connect the heart. Imagine a video tape of your congregation singing "O Come O Come Emmanuel" during a worship service. If you showed that tape to friends, but turned down the volume, what do the faces reveal? Do they show hope, anticipation and longing or a disengaged, glazed-over boredom?

Like the ancient Israelites, let us use the Psalter to invigorate our faith. Like our Methodist forbearers, let us embrace hymns to express our souls. Through song, may the joy of our conviction that the Christ is coming find full expression in our hearts. And on Christmas Eve, may we overflow with elation as we exuberantly sing, "Joy to the World—the Lord is come!"

December 1, 2002
1st Sunday of Advent
Isa. 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mk. 13:24-37

Love (of God) Letters

Remember when people used to write letters? Before frequent long distance calls, e-mail, faxes, pagers, and cell phones, we used to sit at the desk, take out stationery, find a smooth pen, and pour out our thoughts in longhand to a friend. Paul also engages in heartfelt correspon-

dence from his own hand when he writes to his fellow believers in Corinth.

Paul knew the Corinthians personally. He established their community of faith and cared deeply about its life and future. In today's Epistle reading, Paul greets his friends with words of encouragement and strength. He reminds them that the real gifts they need are those that they already possess: spiritual strength, the knowledge and love of Christ, and God's enduring faithfulness.

Throughout the crescendoed busyness of this season, we, like the ancient Corinthians, need this assurance. The gifts we crave are ours by faith. The rest is fluff. Enjoyable, sure, but expendable. Paul's love letter to Christians stretches across time and culture and extends to us this gift of priceless perspective.

During the Advent season, we offer and receive more handwritten greetings than at any other time of year. As we send Christmas cards, let us pause to reflect on how our lives reflect our faith. As we read Christmas cards, let us pause to cherish the shared faith that is also sent. And as we open our Christmas cards, let us also remember to open our Bibles and cherish these letters that teach about the love of God.

December 8, 2002
2nd Sunday of Advent
Isa. 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Pet. 3:8-15a; mk. 1:1-8

Be Bold and Behold

The prophet of Isaiah 40 speaks to a people in crisis. The Judeans have been captured by the Babylonians and suffering in exile for nearly two generations. Why is this persecution taking so long, the people of Judah ask in anguished wonder. If the Exile is God's punishment, have we not paid for our sins?

God speaks reassuring words through Isaiah. "Comfort, comfort, my people says your God—Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her" (Isaiah 40:1). In Hebrew the verbs "comfort," "speak," and "call," are plural imperatives, so God is not commanding Isaiah. Is a heavenly council to reach out to the people or are they caring for Jerusalem themselves? Who is their source of solace?

Restoration approaches—transformation encroaches. Do not worry about the transience of life, Isaiah urges, for God's

word endures forever. God's faithfulness is everlasting. Be bold in your belief.

Behold, your deliverer comes. Yes, this one is strong. But wait, this one is also so very gentle.

When do we feel like the people of Judah, struggling with situations that seem beyond our control? When we feel our faith the least, are not these the moments when we need our faith the most? In our times of crisis, where do we find gentle strength? Who is our source of solace?

And how does the infant savior restore and transform our lives?

December 15, 2002
3rd Sunday of Advent
Isa. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126;
1 Thess. 5:16-24; Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28

Meeting the Message

As Christmas approaches, churches throughout the country prepare their Sunday School pageants. Mary swaddles a baby doll, the angels straighten out their halos, and the wise people clutch their gifts of props. Accounts from both Matthew and Luke's Gospels intertwine to form the script. But what would the Christmas pageant look like if it were based on the Gospel of John?

John's rendering of Jesus' coming stars John the Baptist. Clad in camel hair with a leather belt (taking the sartorial cue from Mark's Gospel) and snacking on honey and locusts (or a suitably crunchable substitute), the actor playing John the Baptist would be dramatic. Following his spectacular entrance, the chorus of priests and Levites would voice the audience's curiosity, "Who are you?" Four times they re-phrase the question, then ask John why he is baptizing. Every time John answers, it seems that the people do not really understand.

Throughout the Gospel of John, the people continually miss the message. They concentrate on what is before them—Jesus reveals what is to come. Advent preparations help us to meet the Christmas message. Seeing the children of the church parade through the organized chaos of the pageant warms our hearts because it reminds us of all the love that goes into the meaning of Christmas. God cares for us enough to

be Emmanuel—God with us. And what God has done for us, Christ teaches us to do for the world. We are to love boldly.

December 22, 2002

4th Sunday of Advent

2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16; Lk. 1:47-55

Rom. 16:25-27; Lk. 1:26-38, 47-55

The Messiah's Mother

Picture Mary as the young mother of Jesus, and what do you imagine? Perhaps she is gazing up to the angel Gabriel, beatifically receiving the news of her role in God's plan. Perhaps she is smiling radiantly at her infant son in the manger. Perhaps she stares directly at you from a portrait, the baby Jesus on her lap, the image of saintly motherhood. She is serene. She is tranquil. She is holy.

But Mary is also brave. Gabriel announces to this young Jewish girl that she will bear a son named Jesus—"He saves." Using messianic language like that found in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls (Luke 1:32-33), this messenger from God informs her of the everlasting reign of the holy child she is to bear. Mary responds honestly, immediately, not about the eminent promise of the baby to be, but with confusion, wonder, and uncertainty: "How can this be?" The angel tells Mary to trust the Holy Spirit. Courageously, she does. And her soul magnifies the Lord.

Inside the Messiah's mother we find the heart of Christmas. Like Mary, we are awestruck at the miracle of the glorious, humble savior child. Like Mary, we dare to trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And we too fill our lives with songs of praise.

December 29, 2002

1st Sunday after Christmas Day

Isa. 61:10-62:3; Ps. 148

Gal. 4:4-7; Lk. 2:22-40

Christmas Presence

Now that Christmas is over, we all heave a sigh of relief. The shoppers rejoice that the choosing and wrapping of gifts is over. The children delight in playing with their new toys. The cooks put away the fancy serving dishes. The traveling relatives eagerly return to their own beds. The wage earners may look forward to getting back to the office.

The harried pace that packs Christmas has slowed. After the peak of family gatherings and their delightful frenzy, we make our way back down to our everyday routines and start feeling like our usual selves.

But for Christians, the real task of Christmas begins. If Christmas is to mean anything beyond buying, eating, and socializing, we need to show it. In our kindness to those we meet, our generosity to the poor, our concern for our world and its problems, and our lives of prayer and

devotion, Christmas becomes real.

Psalm 148 guides us. If we focus on praising God, the rest will follow. In this Psalm, all of creation in heaven and on earth joins in God's praise. How does praise of God permeate our lives? Choices we make about the food we eat, the cars we drive, the homes we live in, the way we spend money—every aspect of what we do each day—effects creation. Long after the Christmas presents are gone, may our Christmas presence praise God. □

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