

The End in Sight

What end? It's only October. Surely, we're not coming to the end any time soon. Well, we are only a month away from the end of the liturgical year. While it is good to keep track of such things and to plan for the transition into a new year when Advent begins, that isn't the end we have in mind here.

We are a pilgrim people; we have a destination in mind as we move forward in our journey of faith. It may seem at times that we are just wandering aimlessly, doing our best to stay clean in an increasingly messy world. But the deeper truth is that we are heading somewhere. We are on a quest toward the kingdom of God. Sometimes we call it a kin-dom as a reminder that this is a corporate journey; it is a community vision. But whatever we call it, it is the vision that Jesus shared again and again with images both powerful and subtle.

Is it heaven? Well, yes, we are on our way to heaven, but not as traditionally described. Instead, it is the new heaven and the new earth of which we get a glimpse in Revelation, a new way of living and being in the presence of God always. It is affirmation and transformation. We are reminded that we are loved and called into new life and new hope and into a community of mutual support and encouragement.

This end, this goal, this hope is in sight because we are living it out every day. Every time we act as the church in the work of discipleship and reconciliation and joy, we reflect this hope; we glimpse this destination. We are a people who live with the end in sight.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - The Things That Are God's

October 22, 2023

[Exodus 33:12-23](#); [Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

The invitation this week in worship is to adjust our vision. We are called to see God in the world in which we live. We are called to identify the things that are God's, including ourselves and the people around us. Even the surprising ones. This requires, first of all, the faith that declares that God is indeed at work in the world around us. We might begin with a creed or a statement of faith in the God who is present. We might use the passing of the peace time not simply to say hello to one another but to thank one another for being the presence of God for us. Maybe this is a time to thank the musicians who offer us the voice of God in the anthems and hymns they lead us to sing. Maybe this is a time to acknowledge the teachers who have been God's wisdom among us. Maybe this is a time (in pastor appreciation month) to say thank you to the preacher who has shared with us the mysteries of God.

It is also a time to offer ourselves again to God's service. Let us be the "things" that are God's. Use us, speak through us, be seen in us, we might pray, or sing, or declare within the congregation. This could be a private moment in the midst of worship, but it could also be a corporate declaration. We are the community that wants to be the conduit for God to be in touch with a hurried and hurting world. We want to be the sign – by how we live together and how we reach out – that God invites all to come and know and be known.

Of course, there is a space for confession for the times when we fall short of the vision that we have of living as examples of the kin-dom, even within the walls of our own church. So let us confess but also resolve to be reconciled with one another so that we can then be a part of the reconciling work of the church.

Our primary mode, however, is one of joy. It is a joy to belong to God and to be useful for the kingdom. Let there be praises from the beginning to the end of this worship moment. Let there be hope and a longing to be a part of that which we declare as God's kingdom, God's promise, God's working. We are indeed the things that are God's.

PREACHING NOTES

What an odd little story tucked there near the end of the book of Exodus. So odd that it really defies our attempts to explain it, so we probably shouldn't even try. Mostly because when you are dealing with manifestations of God, you are in the realm of mystery anyway. So, exhale, and don't attempt an explanation. Please.

That said, there is plenty for us to ponder as we preach this story. There is this crazy conversation that leads to God saying to Moses "I will make all my goodness pass before you." What? What in the world does that mean? Or what out of the world, maybe? I will make all my goodness pass before you. Hmm.

OK, take a look at what is going on here. Back up to verse eleven to get a little context. See, the text says that God and Moses spent a lot of time in conversation, like friends. Like friends, meaning they enjoyed each other's company, but argued as much as agreed. It was a contentious relationship from the beginning. No denying that. They complained to each other, dreamed together; they debated the meaning of life. All the usual stuff that friends do.

This time, Moses is saying he's gotten the short end of the stick again. You gave me this job, he says, but you don't say how I'm supposed to do it, or who is going to help me do it, or even for sure what it is we are supposed to do now. I've got no road map; I've got no itinerary; I've got no clue what's next. All I've got is this vague sense of call and the fact that you seem to like me for some reason. And besides, this is your mess to fix and not mine anyway. God says, "I'm here, take it easy." Moses says, "Well, duh. You're here. You better be here since this is all your idea anyway. But I need more than that. Way more." God says, "OK. Because I like you. Because I told you my name. OK." Moses is a bit stunned by this turn in the conversation and he whispers, "Show me your glory."

So, what did he ask? Did he ask for a light show? For thunder and lightning? Or something else? Glory. How do we give God glory? Or how do we acknowledge God's glory? By how we live. Yeah, sometimes it is praise and worship, but mostly we glorify God by living as God would have us live. Moses wanted something tangible. He wanted to see God walking around, living the way Moses was supposed to live. In short, thousands of years before the time, he was asking for Jesus. He wanted God to put on flesh and come and hang out with him. Come and guide him. Come and sustain him—for the task he was feeling way too inadequate to do. To lead the people that he was sure didn't want to be led by the likes of him. He wanted a glimpse of how it was supposed to be, how he was supposed to be in God. He wanted Jesus.

In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus. We are asking for glory when we sing that song, when we pray that prayer. Give me Jesus. Give me a glimpse of how I'm supposed to walk. Give me a hint of how I'm to do this task you've given me to do when I know it is beyond my ability to do. Parenting, pastoring, teaching, leading, living in love with neighbor and family, none of it is within my capabilities to do. None of it.

God says, "I know. So, here's what I'll do. I'll make all my goodness pass before you." Wait, what? "My goodness," God says, "just what you need, just what will equip you, just what will fill you. On your own, the tasks before you are beyond you. But filled with my goodness, then the impossible becomes possible." "Filled with my goodness," God says to Moses, "you can lead these people."

Goodness is not some ethical standard, some state of being, it is the empowering force that equips us to live as God's people. It is blessing. God blessed Moses on that mountaintop, just as God blesses us anytime we let the Spirit fill us. "Filled with my goodness," God says to us, "you can be who I created you to be. Filled with my goodness..." "See, we are so used to thinking these are attributes that we generate ourselves. If we work hard enough, then we will become good. But that isn't how it works. It is a gift. It is the Spirit at work within us. And we let it because we know that without it, we fall short of who we want to be, let alone who God can equip us to be. And we invite the Spirit to bring us God's goodness because we want it; we want to be there. We want to be that. That something more, that something new. We want to love like that.

And what could bring us down to earth again after all of that abiding in God's goodness than a conversation about taxes? This will come as a shock, I'm sure, but this isn't really a conversation about taxes. Matthew tells us that from the start: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said." We aren't really discussing the ethics of economic policy here. We aren't even giving folks today some help in how they should file their taxes, whether tax avoidance is smart politics/economics or bad morals (or both, somehow), and whether lying to the IRS is the same as lying to anyone else.

But, you might argue, doesn't Jesus do that Jesus thing where he takes what is essentially a nefarious trap and turn it into some good advice and, in the end, help us with the whole taxes thing? Well, maybe, but Jesus isn't really in the advice business. Especially tax advice. He's in the transformation business. He is in the radical rethinking life business. He's about dying to sin and self and rising again to live a life without horizons. Not that paying taxes isn't important for us, but it pales alongside eternity.

It is interesting how the argument plays out, or how Matthew presents it —after telling us that this was a plot to trip up Jesus and coming up with another of those no-win scenarios that the Pharisees love to concoct. And then, once they hit upon a fool-proof plan, they send their disciples to go get Jesus. Wait, what? Yeah, they sent the rookies in to do the dirty work. Maybe they weren't convinced that this plan was indeed foolproof; maybe they had been burned by Jesus too many times in the past. Who knows? But they tagged in the guys who had been onlookers to this point; they sent the probationary ones to get into the fray. And it went about as well as could be expected when confronting Jesus with an unsolvable riddle. (Yeah, I always wondered why the Riddler was surprised when Batman figured out the clues in time to thwart his evil plans. Seems too easy in a way, don't you think?)

OK, preacher reflection time out here. One of the tragic realities of the larger context within which we preach week after week is the painful rise of antisemitism. While the origins for this are many and various, and often out of our hands, it is worth a moment of reflection to ask ourselves as preachers

how we present the Jewish people to our listening congregations. I know that I was often heard to be tapping into the “Keystone Kops” trope that the Gospel writers seem to lean into for both the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus at times. This may seem innocuous, but it can contribute to an overarching understanding that the Jews were and are somehow less intelligent than we are today. Or that the antagonists in every Gospel story are Jews who are trying to get rid of the rabble-rouser Jesus. We need to remember and proclaim that the protagonists in these stories are also Jews, and the large crowds who followed Jesus and listened to him and brought their children to him were Jews as well. Letting any character represent a whole people is a dangerous proposition. As preachers, we have more influence than we might realize in shaping our congregation in their attitude and understanding of the people who gave us Jesus and the rich tradition of faith in which we stand.

Back to the story. How does Jesus respond to this testing? First, he discloses that he sees what they are up to and calls them out for putting him to the test. Then he says, “All right, I’ll answer your spurious question. Show me the coin.” When he says this, he distances himself from their primary complaint. How can this Jesus carry a coin that is a blasphemous symbol of a godlike being? So, he shows that he isn’t carrying such a thing. He has stepped outside of the normal economic world and chooses to live a different way. Not unaware of how the world works, this isn’t naivete on Jesus’ part. He knows the coin; he just chooses to not have any of them on his person.

We could argue that living by barter was possible for that culture in a way that it isn’t in ours. We could point out that choosing to live outside our economic system isn’t a very healthy way for us to live. Yet, there are people who do it all the time. And Jesus would claim, we should argue, that we owe it to them to be supportive and sympathetic to their needs. We could also dig a little deeper and ask what was the point that Jesus was trying to make? Was he really recommending that we all live off the grid? That we eschew money of any kind and live hand to mouth? Maybe, but maybe there was another point he was hoping to shed light upon.

Give to God the things that are God’s. What is the logical next question after that? What are God’s things? There were hundreds of laws and stipulations determining what was sacred – fit for use in the service of God— and what was mundane – of this earth and therefore not sacred and not fit for use in God’s service. But Jesus wants us to take a different look. Everything is sacred and fit for use in the service of God. Everything, starting with us and everyone around us, belongs to God and therefore it is a part of our calling to surrender ourselves to God.

Things are important, to be sure. But Jesus seemed much more interested in people than in things. The things that are God’s had to refer to everyone that he saw around him. The ones who were hanging on his every word, the ones who had given up livelihoods and family to follow him everywhere he went, and also the ones who were setting a trap for him, hoping that he would get tongue-tied talking about God and get himself in trouble with the people or the authorities or empire. They, too, Jesus would claim. They belong to God. And maybe if we could treat one another as though they belonged to God, then we might come closer to living out the promise of the kingdom that he kept talking about.

Maybe if we saw everyone as belonging to God, then we’d have an idea of what glory was.

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – Face to Face

October 29, 2023

[Deuteronomy 34:1-12](#); [Matthew 22:34-46](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

We continue to envision what it would be like to live in the kin-dom of God as a community of faith. But this week, we focus on the doing. It is important for us to understand that loving God and loving neighbor is not about cultivating attitudes or about generating feelings or emotions. Sure, it is great to have a warm heart toward those with whom we serve, but it is not a prerequisite. When we are given this commandment to love God and love neighbor, it is all about how we act, about what we do, how we show love in day-by-day encounters and in casual points of contact as well as moments of mission and ministry. How do we live in community, face to face with the people Jesus told us to serve?

Of course, we can pray, and we need to pray that God changes our hearts so that loving is always the first inclination. But such transformation can often come through practice. So, how do we practice loving one another as we worship? Perhaps it begins in the worship design. Do we allow all sorts of voices to be heard? Do we speak a language that everyone can understand? Do we pay attention to those on the margins of our society and our church?

Take a moment to introduce the passing of the peace. It is, in many places, a rote acknowledgment of those sitting around us during worship. But what if this week became an opportunity to go a little deeper? Instead of saying Christ's peace be with you, we ask, "How can I pray for you today and this week so that you can know peace?" OK, that sounds a little formal. But can find a way to invite the congregation to practice making connections, to move beyond the surface into loving acts of acknowledgment. Instead of an empty ritual, we take a moment to be face-to-face with one another.

It might feel odd for a while. But that's part of growing into the vision of who and what we might be together. This is the end that is in sight. It's in sight because we practice it from time to time. We move beyond intellectual assent to the idea of loving, and we get down to living our love of God and neighbor in little ways as we worship and as we live. And we do it not from a distance but face to face.

PREACHING NOTES

The first thing to note this week is that there is an alternative reading for the Hebrew scriptures. That's not an unusual occurrence. If you look at the Revised Common Lectionary, you'll see that for much of the season after Pentecost, there are two psalms and two readings from the Hebrew scriptures. Some lectionary commentary series will use the alternate reading; others will use the first reading. But that is why you sometimes come up with different texts for the same week.

This week, the alternate reading might make more sense. The first text that we will look at in a moment is the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the death of Moses, and the beginning of the settlement of the Promised Land after the wilderness wandering. The alternate reading goes back to the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, which is where the second half of the Great Commandment comes from. The "love the Lord your God" comes from Exodus, but the "love your neighbor as yourself" comes from Leviticus.

It is putting the two together that makes such a powerful statement. And as this is the reading from Matthew, you might want to use the alternate text as a way of grounding the gospel text historically.

However, we decided to stick with the reading from Deuteronomy. Remember, this short series is titled “The End in Sight,” and Deuteronomy gives us such rich images to allow us to talk about what it means to catch sight of our destination. It also can pair nicely with the gospel. Or at least we think so. But you’ll be the final arbiter of that one.

Deuteronomy 34 has Moses climbing yet another mountain. How many does that make now – you can go research that one if you want to. Suffice it to say, it is a lot. A regular occurrence, you might say. Moses liked hanging out on mountains. After all, it is where his best friend lived. Oh, sure, his best friend lived everywhere; but in the Hebrew scriptures, God seems to prefer mountains. So, of course, Moses spent a lot of time mountaineering. And not so much because it was there (the mountain) but because God was there.

This time, however, he climbs to take in the view. Like a couple of retirees on their vacation, Moses and God stood on top of that mountain while God pointed out all the highlights of the landscape before them. God even gave them the names of the tribes that would settle there, “Gilead as far as Dan.” Moses took in the sights, but he doesn’t have anything to say. It overwhelms him. That which was a dream was now right there in living color. You can’t blame him if a tear rolled down his cheek as he stared across the vista with his best friend. With all that they have been through together, you’d expect the moment to be somewhat emotional.

Then there’s that line that says that Moses won’t be going into that land. He was given the gift of seeing it, but he won’t set foot in it. It sounds like punishment, and it probably is—for his anger issues, for striking the rock when he was just supposed to touch it, or something like that. But you can’t help but wonder if, in the end, it is more of a kindness than a punishment. A quick scan through the next book in the sequence, the one named after Moses’s successor, shows that this settlement thing isn’t going to be a walk in the park. So, maybe instead of punishment, this is time off for sorta good behavior, for doing the best he could to lead a group of people who didn’t really want to be led. Maybe his friend said, “Rest now, Moses. You lived a life of loving God and loving neighbor, even when both were harder to love than you realized when you said yes in the first place.”

Moses is presented as the preeminent prophet, a man of power and wisdom. But what made him so unique was that he knew God face to face. Or rather that God knew him face to face. That’s probably the most incredible part of this brief eulogy at the end of Deuteronomy. All that stuff he could do and did do, all those years that he struggled with these people, and here his epitaph is that God knew him face to face.

When the disciples caught Jesus looking at them, I wonder if they thought of those words. As they were struggling to know who he was, as they caught a glimpse that somehow he was the son of God, the very real presence of God walking alongside them as they tromped around the countryside, did they hope that Jesus knew them face to face? What a gift to be graced by a God who knows us face to face.

That was the question behind the question that contentious day of teaching. It started with a story about a feast, a wedding banquet, and an invitation that some took lightly—to their regret. Then it was tag team question time, Pharisees and taxes, Sadducees and Resurrection and marriage, and then this

one about commandments. The commandment. Matthew says the Pharisees gathered together, and then one came out with his question. Matthew says it was another test. But I wonder. Oh, sure it was a test; everything was a test; everything was trying to trip him up, trying to reduce him in the eyes of the crowds, trying to put him in his place. But I wonder if there was something more in the question. Mark seemed to think so; he tells the story a little differently (Mark 12:28-34). But then given that Jesus messes with their heads a bit with that epilogue about David and his son/Lord, maybe it was just a test.

Whatever is behind the question, Jesus does what Jesus does and gives us a life-giving answer, whether we choose to hear it or not. Whether they chose to hear it or not. It's there in red and white – depending on the translation you use. He answers the question as if it were an honest one. As if the asker really wanted to know. He pulls from the tradition; he isn't the first to declare these two statements, one from Exodus and the other from Leviticus, as preeminent when it comes to commandments. They couldn't argue with this. They couldn't point fingers and call him names when he leaned into the teaching that all of them knew. So, he was safe.

Except safe isn't what he wanted. He wanted them to hear. He wanted them to see. This commandment, or these commandments, if you insist, are not simply laws to follow—like coming to a full stop at the sign and don't speed through the yellow light. No, they are much more than that. Not just guides to a better life, they are the essence of life itself. This isn't a pathway; it is the destination. This isn't just some good advice for getting along in this world; this is about seeing God face to face. This is who we are supposed to be, not just what we are supposed to do. We are the ones who love God with all that is within us, and we are the ones who see our neighbors as an opportunity to love God more by loving them into wholeness and hope.

When Jesus answers this question, he is taking us all up to the mountain and showing the vista of the kingdom of God. "Can you see it," he asks us. "Can you see the Promised Land? Where we all will live this commandment – this description of who and what we are and will be together. Can you see it?" Better yet, can you see yourself there? Can you see yourselves living that way—driven by love and not by the divisions that we've created for ourselves. Shaped by loving care for those who need us. Worshiping as though it was the most important thing we could be doing at any time of day or night, because it is. It is an outpouring of love that defines us, lifts us, and heals us.

And some questions won't matter all that much anymore. That was the little tagline that Jesus throws out to the ones who still wanted to test him. He decides to test them back. "Who is in charge here?" is the question he asks them. Tradition? Heritage? Or the indwelling Spirit of God moving us forward into the Promised Land of hope and love?

As we draw closer, we'll catch a glimpse of the one who knows us face to face.