

Sermon 140720
Ascension, Seattle, WA
Proper 11A

Collect

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 44:6-8

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:

I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me.

Who has announced from of old the things to come?

Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid;

have I not told you from of old and declared it?

You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me?

There is no other rock; I know not one.

Psalms 86:11-17

Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth;

knit my heart to you that I may fear your Name.

I will thank you, O LORD my God, with all my heart,

and glorify your Name for evermore.

For great is your love toward me;

you have delivered me from the nethermost Pit.

The arrogant rise up against me, O God, and a band of violent men seeks my life;

they have not set you before their eyes.

But you, O LORD, are gracious and full of compassion,

slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth.

Turn to me and have mercy upon me;

give your strength to your servant; and save the child of your handmaid.

Show me a sign of your favor so that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed;

because you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

Romans 8:12-25

Brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Sermon

In seminary, we used to joke that the lectionary
should come with difficulty ratings, just like ski slopes.
On Advent 4B, the last Sunday before Christmas,
we hear of Nathan telling Samuel not to build a Temple
out of wood
and Gabriel telling Mary that her son will be the Son of God,
in short, a living Temple.

I'd call that a bunny slope.

They're wonderful passages and they practically preach themselves.

I like those Sundays.

Other Sundays are more difficult.

I would call today a double black diamond.

Proceed with caution.

Trail may contain exceptionally steep slopes, narrow trails,
obstacles, and sudden cliffs.

Thank you, Marilyn.

So, let's see what we've got here.

In Paul's letter to the Romans we have
creation subjected to futility and bound to decay,
rejection of the flesh and the spirit of slavery,
and hope for what we do not see.

Just to make things more fun, this passage has been used
to justify body/mind dualism and dogmatic (unquestioned) obedience.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us of
the devil planting evil seeds among us
that will grow into the children of the evil one
who will be cast into the furnace at the end of days.

This passage is invoked to justify the idea
that some people are inherently evil
as well as the doctrine of the Rapture.

Nonetheless, there is some really good stuff here.

There is good news.

So, bear with me, while we make one last check of our equipment

With caution, and a little help from God,
we should be able to get to the bottom of the passages,
and even have some fun along the way.

Are you with me?

Like Marilyn, I am an ordained scientist,
and that means I use both my theological training
and my scientific training
as safety equipment
when reading scripture
or generally when going about
the business of Christianity.

Like all safety equipment,
it's only good when it protects you from falls,
without getting in the way of clear vision,
and true appreciation for what you're doing.

Science should not get in the way of scripture,
but it can help us not be overly swayed by our own opinions
(Which dictum, incidentally, is a paraphrase of Richard Hooker.)

Both science and theology have hammered home the importance
of waiting to see the actual results of an experiment,
rather than pre-judging what the outcome will be.

Today's passages are all about life,
but not necessarily the life with which we are most familiar.
In particular, they caution us to wait and see what fruit a plant will bear,
before ripping it up.

It may look unsavory, but be quite useful.
Or, as the Gospel suggests, it may be that tearing it out
would damage the good plants around it.

Lesson number one: allow yourself to be uncertain about scripture
and people
and ideas
until you've had the time to see them in action.

On the other hand, being an ordained scientist has taught me
that science and Christianity are not always on the same page.
This is not to say that they contradict one another,
only that they sometimes focus on different things.
Our common sense definitions of life and seed and fruit
may not be the same as the scientific usage,
and even that may be different from the way Jesus uses the words.

As a trivial example,
think about tomatoes.

Fruit or vegetable?

[Shall we vote?]

As a biologist, I have to say that tomatoes are fruits.

Like apples and oranges,
tomatoes develop out of one particular tissue in flowers
Tomatoes are fruits.

A chef might give me a different answer.

Along with the Oxford English Dictionary,
many people expect fruit to be sweet.
If you use it in savory cooking,
it must be a vegetable.

There is nothing contradictory about these two ideas of fruit,
but what you are planning to do
makes a difference in how you see the world.

Are you making a sauce, or classifying plants?

A less trivial example of competing definitions
involves whether a corporation
has the same rights as a person
in the eyes of the law.

What is a person?

And how similar should common sense, legal, and religious definitions be?

One of the most important versions of this dilemma
arises when we start talking about life and death
as Jesus and Paul do in today's readings.

Lesson number two: The same word, even the same idea,
can have two radically different meanings,
when we have different goals in mind.

Knowing this, we can be prepared for times when the trajectory of the world seems to be going one way scientifically
– death and decay – even heat death if you like –
while Christians see it going in a completely different direction
- redemption and salvation – the kingdom of Heaven.

We must be prepared when listening to Paul and Jesus,
to look for times when they want you to see it both ways,
understand both perspectives
to better appreciate the kingdom of Heaven.

Paul's letter to the Romans
speaks to some of our most pressing questions about faith
and some of our greatest concerns in science and religion.

How am I to reconcile the powers of the world,
including human weakness and political expediency,
with God's good will for us in creation and salvation?

Or, in modern philosophical terms,
how am I to reconcile evolution and entropy,
with my Christian hope for repentance and resurrection?

How do I hope when the world seems rigged for selfishness and decay?

Life is something profound within the context of our universe.
It is profound, unexpected, and holy,
as are choice and forgiveness.

They represent something that runs alongside
the normal rules of physics.

I do not say they contradict them –
I do not believe they contradict them –
but they require us to focus our attention differently.

For the ancient Hebrews and for Paul,
life meant more than the ability to eat and drink and reproduce.

It meant that the plain ordinary dust of the earth
had been filled with the Spirit of God,
and that spirit, moving in it, moved it.

The specialness, the wonder of life and choice
was not the product of the individual particles of dirt
but the product of God's breath
that moved within the body.

We are literally inspired by God,
breathed by God.

As bodies, we are subject to futility and decay.
There is no escape from that through slavery to natural laws,
through works of the flesh.
And yet, our souls, our very selves
need not suffer the same deterioration.
That aspect of us, our power if you will,
comes not from our physical selves
or even mastery of our physical environment,
but from having God moving within us.
We alone cannot overcome the barrier of death,
nor can we conquer selfishness, greed, and scarcity.
God can and God has.

We suffer futility and strife because there really is a difference
between scientific life – the biochemistry of our bodies
and theological life – the movement of our souls.
And we, as individuals, have trouble remembering which we are.
Theological life and scientific life are not the same thing.

And many religions have stopped there.
Many believers, sadly many Christians, have stopped there.
They said you simply must choose one picture over the other.
There is a war between flesh and spirit.
But we do not stop with an uneasy dichotomy,
nor did Paul,
for such a divided universe makes God
only half of a creator – making Spirit but not matter –
or some sort of bookie – taking bets for both sides.
In either case, this war of spirit against matter does not match up
with the good news of Jesus Christ,
a material human, in whom God was pleased to dwell.

Paul says:

“creation was subjected to futility ... in hope that the creation itself
will be set free from its bondage to decay
We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves ...
while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.”

God has planned that our individuality will be consummated
in the Spirit.

In some way, currently unseen,
the Spirit, moving in the flesh,
will redeem the flesh.

It is not a war, but a process of development.

We are growing into our selves.

More than that, God’s inspiration of the entire universe
involves our participation, through faith, in the work of the Spirit.

This is why Christians can be so enthusiastic about science.

As we come to know the physical world,
we can better understand the role we play in redeeming it
and better play our part in seeing it reach its full potential.

I do not know how that will work, exactly:

“hope that is seen is not hope.”

And yet I believe in learning all I can about the world,
both from the scientific perspective and the theological perspective,
so that I might take my place.

Paul says we have the first fruits of the Spirit,
and I can see that,
so long as I remember what work he does with the idea of fruit.

We have life and faith, will and conscience, love and forgiveness,
and joy in these things God is bringing to fruition.

Paul has given us hope for these things,
but Jesus has given us practical advice.
Knowing that we play a role in salvation is one thing;
knowing how is so much more challenging.

We are tempted, upon learning that we can help,
Become overenthusiastic.
Like first time gardeners,
first time teachers,
first time pastors,
we do not trust in God to do the heavy lifting.
Jesus says we have an important role to play,
but we must understand what it is.

In the middle of Matthew's gospel,
in the midst of five other parables,
all comparing the kingdom of heaven to planted seed,
we find today's lesson:
the parable of the wheat and the tares.
It is as though Matthew wanted to remind us
that we should not take any one metaphor too seriously.
The seed may be all people – planted in the soil of the world
or all good people – wheat among the tares
or their treasure – the fruit of the wheat
or the word – which takes root in the soil of our hearts.
The gospel, like a seed in good soil, has a life cycle.
It is planted in our hearts.
We treasure it and pass it on to the next generation.
We become it as it produces fruits in us and through us.

In this one parable, wheat and tares appear,
the good seed and the bad,
the good fruits and the bad.
We are tempted to judge as early as we can.
We are tempted to rip out the bad seeds and the bad plants,
to judge before time
what must come and what must go
and what will endure.
But that is not our role.
We do not know yet just what will bear good fruits.
And even when we do,
we cannot predict what harm will come
from trying to weed the plot too early.
It was never up to us to separate the wheat from the tares.
God will do that.

We cannot say just what aspects of our body will lead to redemption.
Nor can we speak for our body politic,
 the church or the country,
 though I have my suspicions.
I have very strong suspicions.

Still, I believe it is my job to plant the good seed,
 to tend and to water,
 to encourage all to grow,
 and see what comes.
It sounds strange in the 21st century,
 but I even have faith in the reapers and the harvest.
That too will come, though I don't know how.

So I find myself
 in the growing field.
I can appreciate the good seed and the bright light of righteousness
 that shines through.
I can appreciate the evil seed,
 the weeds that choke and tares
 that will eventually die and burn away.
Sometimes that field is within my heart
 and sometimes it is my community.
Sometimes it is the world
 and sometimes infinitely more.

You have a part to play in all of that.
Allow yourself to be uncertain about scripture
 and people
 and ideas
 until you've had the time to see them in action.
It never hurts to learn more,
 even when you have to act before you know all the details.
The same word, even the same idea,
 can have two radically different meanings,
 when we have different goals in mind.
Pay attention to the fruit you bear.
 Pay attention to what you call weed
 and what you call a flower.
It matters.