

New Year's Day 2020

I hope all of you have had a wonderful season of holy day celebrations, Christmas and Thanksgiving and New Year. As you know I ordinarily follow the lectionary readings for sermon reflections each week. I have noticed that on the first Sunday of the new year, that is, the 2nd Sunday after Christmas, the same four texts are repeated year after year. I must confess that I was uninspired by them this year.

However, I was taken by the texts selected for New Year's Day, and I suspect *they* might be the same from year-to-year, nonetheless I saw something in them worth sharing, so they have become the focus of today's message. What I intend to do is read them, and let them speak for themselves.

I am sure you have noticed we haven't had a reading thus far in the service. There is about to be four. It seems that the intent of the lectionary selections is consistent with the idea that the beginning of the year is a good time to reflect about the meaning of life, and the selections are in line with that intent.

There is a text about the majesty of creation and the place of humanity in it. There is a poem about time and the times of life. And there are two texts that envision the end of time, one with implications for how the present should be spent, and the other that looks forward to heaven. All together they make up a challenging set of sermons for all those who desire a better understanding of life. They will simply be read in

turn with a conclusion at the end. Largely, they will be left to speak for themselves. As I am reading, allow yourself a few minutes of thought about life's ultimate issues, as we call them. The first is the 8th Psalm:

Psalm 8

- 1 Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.
- 2 Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your
enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.
- 3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your
fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in
place,
- 4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
- 5 You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- 6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
- 7 all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,
8 the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
- 9 Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

- 1 There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
- 2 a time to be born and a time to die,

a time to plant and a time to uproot,
3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
6 a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
7 a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
8 a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.
9 What do workers gain from their toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. 13 That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

Matthew 25:31-46

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

45 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ 46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Revelation 21:1-6a

21 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” 5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

In thinking about meaning, the place to start is with the sky, I suppose, the vast reach of interstellar space, the apparent smallness of Earth, and the wonder of the life that has been found on it, and that we all share. There is both a smallness and a greatness to being a human being. We are not much in the grand scheme, yet *have been given* glory.

There is a kind of cynicism in the text from Ecclesiastes; that life has no meaning at all except in the ordinary living out of the days, achieving a small scale happiness that almost ignores the eternity that has been set in the heart. But this text represents a

looking around at the everyday conditions of earthly life, and envisions a practical reality, the reality of a life lived in time, in which even our greatest accomplishments fade into insignificance eventually.

One of the great insistences in biblical faith is that meaning comes from relationships, including if not especially with the less fortunate, or with the stranger, and we are given this difficult and challenging idea that service to others is service to Jesus. Jesus himself shows up in the persons of need. When we ignore them or just structure our lives so that we don’t even know that we are ignoring them, it is to our detriment. Conversely, when service gets to the point that it comes so naturally that we don’t even realize that we are doing it, it is to our benefit.

We look up to the skies, then we look around to the life in which we are immersed. We see the wonder of creation, the reality of everyday life, work, eating and sleeping, participating in the common features of humanity, and the significance of sacrifice and service. And then we look forward to the dream of life beyond the sky. Stepping back to reflect on it is a good “beginning of the year,” activity.

Think about it.

May God bless 2020!

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