

## Walk Toward God

*A sermon by the Rev. Daniel Simons  
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

EPIPHANY 6: FEBRUARY 12, 2023

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 | 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9 | MATTHEW 5:21-37

So, when I was a kid, we used to play a game called Follow the Leader. Right? You know this game. And it was, for us, it was way more than just “see if you can rub your nose and tap (I still can't do it) at the same time.” This was like, “See how impossible you can make this.” So squeezing through some little narrow crack in the jungle gym, or climbing up over a branch, or getting some... you know, making it impossible for people to follow - that was the fun of it.

It feels a little bit like this is what Jesus is doing - where he is just taking the rules and making them harder. “You’ve heard it said, but I say to you,” and just raises the bar up. If you didn't think about it - you're guilty of it.

I want to tag this right up front because I think this is one of those things that gives religion such a bad name - that we just make it harder for people to live their lives. In fact, Jesus even tags this later in Matthew's Gospel. He is going to say to the religious leaders: “You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.” He goes right for it. “You're making it worse with all these religious regulations. It's not helping.” So what's he doing, if rule-following isn't what God is after? This sermon is not long enough, we'd have to be in a different kind of church where a 40-minute sermon was about right to talk about what is really going on in each of these instances. But I'll say, in a word, Jesus is moving from external obedience to internal obedience, saying “Pay attention to the motive. What are the ethics of this?” That reframes everything.

And in this sermon, I want to lean into what I think is the essence of what he's doing: the punchline here, which is pretty brutal, but listen deeply: “If your eye causes you to sin, rip it out. Better that than go to hell. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” This is Prophetic Speech - the prophets got people's attention by stating things, usually in the negative, and in a way that you couldn't miss what they were talking about. And they were also talking in a world where that was normal punishment, like Sharia law - it didn't have prisons, you just had immediate punishment. It's bracing language, but what he's really doing is exactly what the prophets were doing. Listen to it this way:

Nothing is more important to you, and to the world, than God.

God's life in you.

Your one truest, most precious life which is being given to you by God, which is God  
within you, moment by moment.

So don't waste it.

Don't squander it.

Don't live small or live distracted, or live anxious or live wantonly.

Walk toward God, whatever it takes, whatever the cost.

The prophets put it out there without varnish or glitter so that we wouldn't miss it. Maya Angelou, who's one of our modern-day prophets, she says (we posted this out on a banner when George Floyd was murdered): "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

"Know better, do better." Sounds easy, right? It's hard to live into because we like to pretend. The prophets don't want us to pretend; they know just how to put enough pressure in the right place that we say "Ouch," and "That's the right kind of pain I need right now." It's truth. And their directness is all in the service of saying: "Don't lie to yourselves or anyone else. Don't pretend - life is too short and life matters too much. There's a bigger, better way. Don't distract yourself from what doesn't matter - life is too short to waste time that way."

Moses stands on the edge of the Promised Land, looking in with his people. This is his last sermon in our first reading. He won't get there with him, so he gives them his last word, his message, saying in that prophetic voice of God, "Look, I've said it before: blessings and curses; go this way or go that way; choose life - just choose life; walk toward God." Know better. Do better.

Cultivating this habit of walking toward God, or at least not pretending when we're not walking toward God, creates in us, over a lifetime, a habit of being brave, of being true, of being centered, of being hopeful. And that is like yeast that moves through a community and changes the world.

We were practicing it a little yesterday at the annual meeting, which was a great meeting. I can always tell when a meeting has gone well because people stay afterward, and they stay and they stay and they stay. And it was just an effervescent group of joy. And we passed a budget that had a \$60,000 deficit.

There's a big gap, and we chose to pass a budget with that gap because it feels like a creative gap. Gaps are really important when they're that kind of gap. That's what an athlete's always looking for or an artist, like "What's in that space between what I know and do and what I am imagining I'm being called toward?" And we are walking toward God collectively. We're actively in that process of saying, "What is God inviting us to risk and dare and try and do and be and become in this chapter of our lives together?" And that's an exciting gap. It's scary because there's probably some things we'll leave behind and we don't quite know what the future holds, but it is invigorating because we are ready to go. Keep going, to walk toward God to know better and do better - to choose life.

Next week in this liturgy, we will be commissioning our first Sacred Ground Circle who, after 11 sessions together, over many more weeks, are closing their circle. But really, they're opening themselves up to their next steps. They will commit to forever be on the Pilgrim's Way: to listen for the call and follow it wherever it leads, whatever the cost, to walk toward God - to know better, do better, choose life. We are all on this way.

I always like giving the last word to the Apostle Paul because he'll take it anyway. He's a prophet, so he says what it is with no glitter and no varnish. In this reading from Corinth today, he's writing to one of his main churches from the Corinthians, and with typical exasperation, he's saying, "Oh, you people, I can't even go beyond the ABC's with you, and it's because you've gotten stuck in this stupid argument about who's better, whose flag of leadership you're going to follow. Is it Paul or is it Apollos? Neither of us matter in this. Only God who gives the

growth matters. You're being merely human.” Love that line. But somehow, we're being called to be more than merely human here. You are God's field, God's building.

One of my mentors, the Superior of the monastery I belonged to, always preached, “Keep God the subject of the sentence and you'll be fine.” So whenever we substitute something else for the subject of the sentence, usually ourselves, what we want - we wonder why things aren't working out so well. Just let God be the subject - orient around that and watch what happens.

I think Paul would be speaking to this St. Paul's equally as the Corinthians, to say, “You are God's project. You're God's garden in Norwalk here in the second generation of the 21st century. The old world, the way we have been doing it. (I don't mean “we” here, I just mean generally “we.”) Is in flames, and it's flooded, and it's falling down. And new life is starting to sprout all over, in the cracks, in the edges, in the margins. So don't get stuck on anything that holds you back” is the prophetic message.

Go find out what God is doing in those cracks. We are God's field, God's building. So, let's notice what God is growing and what God is building, here and around us.

Let nothing hold us back. Walk toward God.  
Know better. Do better. Choose Life.

Amen.