



GPS GUIDE: NOVEMBER 5, 2023 Grow. Pray. Study.

Sermon Series: A Work in Progress

Sermon: Looking Back

Monday: Read Revelation 7:9-17

In today's reading, John invites us to look behind the curtain, to see what he sees. It's a powerful vision, all the more powerful because it doesn't jibe with some of our popular notions of heaven. You'll notice no one was lounging around on a cloud, gently strumming a golden harp, everyone on what seems to be a permanent vacation. Here, heaven isn't filled with cherubim and seraphim but with those who have been through the great ordeal and come out on the other side. The saints, in other words. Those who lived lives of faith and paid the price for it. In John's time, the price was high. Christians were persecuted and gave their lives rather than bow before Caesar. The "great ordeal" was different for the saints we know. Most of us haven't known any martyrs. But it's hard to think of a saint without thinking of what they gave up for their love of God and God's children. Think of Mother Teresa living in and among the poverty of Calcutta. Think of Desmond Tutu watching his country unravel at the seams. Think of Albert Schweitzer building hospitals in Africa. But even more, think of those women and men whose names most people don't know, those who simply lived simply, who traded ambition for compassion, greed for generosity, despair for hope. Those people of faith who taught us right from wrong, who showed us that giving to God was our first priority, who insisted that we provide hospitality to strangers, and care for the poor. Who have been the saints in your life who showed you what God's love is like?

Prayer: Loving God, help me to follow the examples of the everyday saints who have been a part of my life. Amen.

Tuesday: Read John 11:32-44

While I don't use the King James Version of the Bible often, I do happen to love its rendering of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus, after weeping and being emotionally moved, commands those around him to open Lazarus' tomb. There's instant protest. Lazarus had been dead for a few days, and everyone knew that rolling that stone away wouldn't be pretty. Martha calls out: *But Lord, he stinketh!* What descriptive

language. Of course, John is the Gospel of Signs. There are seven signs, and the raising of Lazarus is that ultimate seventh sign, revealing Jesus' identity as the Christ. But, as much as this sign is about Jesus, it's also about us. Because we are all Lazarus. We are all dead and lifeless. We are all wrapped up corpses, bound in the grave clothes which the world lays on us. We are stiff and we have all begun to smell a little rank. We stinketh.

Until - until! - Jesus calls us out of the tomb. Until he orders everything that binds us and holds us down, to be stripped off of us and tossed aside. Until he breathes his holy breath into us again and makes us a new creation. The Body of Christ, the community of the baptized, and the Communion of Saints - we are all Lazarus. We stinketh, until Jesus calls us out, frees us, and gives us life. In fact, this is what binds us together, the biologically alive church and the biologically dead church: we have all been called out of the tomb and unwrapped. In this sense, the raising of Lazarus isn't just a miracle that Jesus performed thousands of years ago in a land far, far away. It's the work of Jesus today. How is God calling you to new life today? How is God giving new life to First Christian Church?

Prayer: Living God, help us to live as the new creation you call us to be. Amen.

Wednesday: Read Matthew 5:1-12

In the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is addressing the disciples. A crowd gathers as he preaches, but in the beginning, at least, Jesus is speaking directly to his followers. Not *to* the crowd, but *about* the crowd. And Jesus tells the disciples to remember: you are here for THEM. You are blessed only inasmuch as you share God's blessing with them. God loves most the ones the world would throw away, and the ones who stand alongside them. This is what Jesus wants his followers to know first; this is where Jesus starts - not with ethical requirements, not with law, but with grace. Before teaching and preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounces God's grace. Before healing anyone, before confronting the Pharisees, before eating with sinners and tax collectors, before performing miracles, before cleansing the temple, before dying on a cross, before he is resurrected, before saying or doing almost anything else that we know about, Jesus pronounces God's grace. And this is not so much a message for the meek, the poor in spirit, those who are mourning, or the merciful - at least not directly. It is a message for us, for Jesus' followers. For the church. For you and me. And the message is crystal clear: we begin with grace. Who have you known who embodied Jesus' command to share God's grace? What have you learned from watching them?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, help me to share with others the grace I have found in you. Amen.

Thursday: Read Matthew 5:1-12 (same as yesterday)

The Beatitudes isn't some warm and fuzzy little slogan to be brandished on a coffee mug, it's a mandate for life in the Kingdom of God. It is who we are meant to be. They are the attitudes we are meant to have, the attitudes we are meant to be, the attitudes that Jesus taught and modeled by his loving and sacrificial life. And what becomes of such people who live by such attitude and manner? What accompanies the

blessings? What does the blessing look like? The Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven. For the poor in spirit - theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The mourners will be comforted, as in those glorious words from Revelation: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4) The meek will inherit the earth. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, their hunger satisfied. The merciful will receive mercy, the pure in heart will see God, the peacemakers will be called the children of God, and those who are persecuted for righteousness and reviled for Jesus' sake will gain the Kingdom of Heaven. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." This isn't just a blueprint for behavior and a manifesto for action - it is the litany of characteristics describing the citizens of heaven - the redeemed, saved, and sanctified people of God. In what ways do we as a church reflect this "picture of the Kingdom of God?" What is one change you can make to more fully embody these attitudes?

Prayer: Eternal Father, may we be a people and a church that live guided by the Beatitudes. Amen.

Friday: Read Matthew 7:13-27

Here in the last verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus isn't talking about hell or eternal punishment or divine judgment; instead, he's simply telling the truth. Jesus tells the truth: there is a path that leads to life, and there is one that leads to destruction... and the one that leads to life is a lot harder, so you better be careful, and you better pay attention. Jesus tells the truth: there is some awfully bad fruit out there, passing itself off as God's word. Jesus tells us the difficult truth: that there is a way to live - a way to build a life - that is *not* going to stand up to the storms of life, storms that eventually come for all of us. But there is also a way to live, a way to love, a way to act, that leads to *life*. This is a more difficult path, one that is hard (so, so hard), but it's worth it. Go this way, and you can build a life that will stand up to any storm. As we remember the saints this week, we remember that these are not just words. This week we remember the ones who took the narrow gate, the hard road, the ones whose lives produced such wonderful fruit, the ones who built their houses on the rock, the ones whose lives withstood the storm. We remember those who didn't just hear Jesus' words, but acted on them, building a life on that firm foundation. What have you learned from their example? How can you put it into practice in your life?

Prayer: Gracious God, show me the way that leads to you. Amen.

Saturday: Read Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Prayer: Holy God, even now the race is set before us. You are calling us into a future that is unknown and uncertain. But we will persevere, because those that came before us loved us enough to tell us what they had learned of your love and redemption, and their lives tells us still. So, for all the saints of Christ's church whose extraordinary lives astound us, and for all the saints whose ordinary lives glow with the unmistakable light of grace, we give you thanks, O God. May our lives honor them, and you. Amen.

