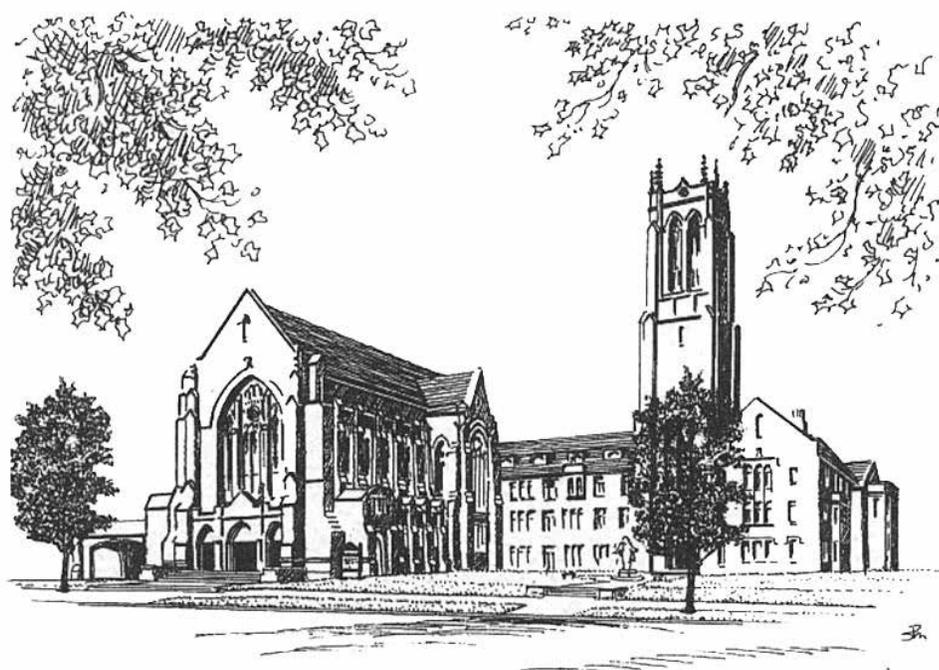


WE ARE IN GOOD HANDS
by
Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

August 7, 2016

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Texts: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 • Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23 • Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 • Luke 12:32-40

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Psalm 50

The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him.

He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
“Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”

The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. Selah

“Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God.

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me.

“Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver.

Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God.”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had

left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12:32-40

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

It is always a good exercise to notice the verbs used in the Gospel stories and parables. In this particular story there are two verbs that catch my attention because they are an awkward pair: prepare and give.

Let me share with you what I mean.

Preparation connotes hard work. We usually think of preparation as working hard to get ready for something.

Olympic athletes like Simone Biles or Michael Phelps or another prepare for years to compete at the highest level and in many ways they will have earned what they accomplish.

Expectant parents work hard to prepare for the coming of a child. Go to birth classes, visit hospital, go to the doctor, buy closets full of diapers, prepare in every way they can so they are ready for that child.

If you are conscientious about the life of faith, you prepare yourself for worship, you are a person of prayer, you think hard about decisions, you try to serve others, you prepare yourself so that you recognize Jesus when he shows up as in the parable today.

We must be prepared for his coming. We don't know where or how Christ will intervene in our daily lives, so we must be prepared, like servants awaiting their master's return. "Be prepared," Jesus says.

But, Martin Luther's age-old quote comes to mind: "pray as if everything depends on God, work as if everything depends on you."

And if you are a conscientiousness type, you do the second part well. You work as if it all depends on you.

Parenting as if it all depends on you. Working your job like if you don't do it, who will...

But the cautionary word from this Gospel text seems to be this: even as we prepare and seek God's Kingdom, it isn't actually all dependent on us. It is God's good pleasure to *give* the kingdom — a Kingdom that no amount of money can build. God is the giver. We seek and receive.

An Olympian or parent or human worth their salt will tell you that what they do well is part preparation and all gift born out of a love for what they do.

To prepare for Christ to show up in our lives, says Michael Renninger, is really to fall in love with God, to surrender to God, to trust in God for our life, our possessions, our futures.

Thomas Merton's prayer comes to mind. It's a good prayer for anyone.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

This is a faithfulness that trusts deeply and is moving us to receive God's love and deeper ways.

Prepare, give, receive are linked together.

Notice the verses that are hinged to one another by the repetition of that single word: *give*. It is God's good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom, Jesus says, and then immediately: Sell your possessions and *give* alms.

Jesus just tells us what gives God pleasure. Giving the Kingdom to us and to all. And then invites the nature of a generous God to shape our own lives.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott, who is white, tells about when she first started going to St. Andrew, an African-American Presbyterian church in Marin County, California. She was broke, an alcoholic, single, and pregnant.

“When I was at the end of my rope,” she writes, “the people at St. Andrew tied a knot for me and helped me hold on.”

When she announced she was pregnant, the congregation cheered for her, and immediately began giving her things: food, clothes, and most importantly the assurance the baby was going to be part of the family.

They also began slipping her money. She writes about how many of the older women, living close to the bone on small Social Security checks, would sidle up to her and stuff bills in her pocket. “It was always done so stealthily,” she writes.” Mary Williams, in her eighties, was one of the most regular donors, giving her plastic baggies full of dimes. Lamott needed the money.

She eventually got over her embarrassment at receiving and learned to say thank you. What she finds remarkable, many years later, is that though her financial situation has changed dramatically — now she’s a successful writer with plenty of money — Mary Williams still brings her baggies full of dimes, still slips them discreetly into her pockets, even though she doesn’t need them anymore, and even though Williams herself probably does need them. Lamott’s situation has changed, but Mary hasn’t.

Lamott often gives the money away or leaves the bags around her house, as reminders of the character of the church she has learned to call home — and the character of the God they worship.

Giving our whole selves over to this God is what it is to prepare for Christ to show up in our lives and in our world.

The Kingdom of God can be rightly understood as fulfilling the longings of God for all of creation. Isaiah gives clues about what the kingdom represents — every time a widow and an orphan are cared for; every time our worship isn’t for ritual sake but to display the beauty of our God, every time our generosity is centered in a heart for God.

Aiming for this kind of faithful kingdom of God-oriented life takes love so that when these moments of beauty and justice come, we will recognize them for what they are — the very coming of Jesus Christ.

Huston Smith was maybe the foremost scholar on world religions in the 20th century, and he wrote the best selling book on that. He has been married to his beloved Kendra for almost 70 years now. They lost an adult child and a grand daughter in tragic ways; they have known darkness and light in their lives. After the study of religion and rooted in his convictions as a person of Christian faith, Smith says at the end of it all he's absolutely convinced of this truth: "We are in good hands."

Prepare, give, and receive — and do it again — knowing through it all that we are held in God's good and loving hands.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeier at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.