Sermon for The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, February 10, 2019
Title: Half truths

In 2016, Adam Hamilton wrote a wonderful little book called Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say. It explores, as you probably got from the title, some popular Biblical-sounding expressions tucked away in the pockets of well-meaning Christians that have, nevertheless, little to do with the God revealed in our scriptures, sayings like “everything happens for a reason,” “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” and, per the title, “God helps those who help themselves.” Now these have largely emerged out of the more evangelical expression of our faith, but I’m guessing you have at least heard some of these and maybe wondered, maybe worried, is that really what we believe? Really what my tradition says?

The good news, according to Adam Hamilton is, no, these sayings are not really at the heart of Christianity. But in some senses, that’s the bad news, too, because these platitudes and clichés exist for a very real reason and respond to a very real anxiety at the heart of our faith, namely, that we don’t really understand God – can’t really understand God – and God’s ways are fundamentally confounding to us. At the heart of our faith is a mystery that can leave us rather unsettled. We say ours is a God of justice and mercy who loves each and every one of us with infinite abundance, and then we look around us at a world filled with suffering, a world filled with every imaginable injustice, where good, innocent, vulnerable people are often exploited and greedy, selfish predators often thrive, an incongruity which understandably leaves us scratching our heads. So we cling to half-truths and empty words that at the very least resonate with our capitalist, pull yourself up by your bootstraps culture – sayings that feel comfortable not because they are true but because they ask little of us and seem familiar. The problem is these sayings, being so flimsy and fragile, tend to break down pretty quickly when we lean on them too hard, like in a moment of crisis, or when we spend a few minutes actually thinking about them.

At the heart of many of these sorts of sayings is one of the primary heresies of Christianity: that God loves us, blesses us, forgives us, because we deserve it. Because we are worthy. Because we say the right prayers and do the right things. Because we repent and beg for help and know our weakness all too well. Because we are working hard and standing on the side
of right. When what scripture tells us, over and over again, is that God just loves us, long before we do any of that, long before we even want to do any of that. Not because we are worthy but precisely because we are not, which when we really think about it makes us all the more desperate for God’s generous kindness and prodigal compassion.

All four of our lessons this morning hinge on this question of worth, highlighting a posture not of righteous striving but miraculous relief, pointing to a fundamentally different kind of relationship between us and God. The first tells the story of the call of the prophet Isaiah – a rather terrifying tale, when all is said and done. A vision of the temple where Seraphs – winged creatures of flame and fire attending the holy one – sing to God while the very pillars of the foundation are crumbling around them, and in this moment of chaos and destruction, which is also a moment of new possibilities, Isaiah laments his past, crying, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” And one of the seraphs approaches him with a burning coal – perhaps less an instrument of torture than of cleansing, cauterizing – touching his lips, assuring him that his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out. Can you imagine hearing anything more incredible from an angel? Could there be any better news? You are free, the seraph says. The ties that bind you to your former darkness have been severed. No wonder that when God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" he jumps right up and says, "Here am I; send me!" like someone whose doctor just told him the cancer is miraculously gone, like someone waking up from the fog of depression with alarming clarity and hope, like someone whose compulsion to use drugs and alcohol is suddenly lifted, Isaiah jumps up and says, “Whatever that was, whatever this is, I will give my life to have it more fully and know it more truly. Here I am. Send me.”

And then there’s the Psalm. David – the great king - praising God, bowing down, because of God’s love and faithfulness, God’s responsiveness, God’s concern for the lost and downtrodden, among whom David, though the wealthiest and most powerful of men, must also have counted himself. David, the fabled son, who surely knew the darkness of his heart – a murderer’s heart, a rapist’s heart, a liar’s heart, but a repentant heart – better than anyone. Like a criminal granted clemency at the last minutes, like a suspended athlete finally returned to the game he loves, David turns toward God, utterly vulnerable, his brokenness on full display, singings songs of God’s saving glory and God’s sustaining hand.

Ah, and then there’s Paul. Good old Paul. So riddled with issues and insecurities and yet, arguably, the founder of the most widespread religion in the world today (would the story of
Jesus have gone much further than a corner of Galilee without him? Probably not.) And yet as Paul recounts for the community in Corinth the many post-resurrection appearances of Christ, he concludes that Jesus’ last appearance was to “the least of the apostles” – himself – someone unfit for such a title because he was, in his earlier life, a notorious persecutor of the Church. “But by the grace of God,” Paul says, “I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.” Like a drowning person pulled from the river who rushes up against the current to stop those pushing others like him in, Paul was desperate for God’s grace, God’s love, God’s forgiveness, crying not only “here I am, send me,” “but here I am, have me, all of me.” Paul knew keenly the torment of a hate-filled, self-righteous, zealous life without God.

And then we come to our Gospel, a much beloved and delightful story about the calling of the first disciples. Jesus, pushed to the edge of the shore by the desperate crowds who had gathered around him, hops into a boat of one of the local fishermen. He doesn’t know it, but the boat belongs to his future best friend, Simon. We know him better as Peter, aka, Cephas from Paul’s letter. I can’t but help think about when I first met my own best friends at various points in my life – that hopeful but awkward exchange of words, an energy building, a lightness in the conversation that bodes well for the future. Can’t you just imagine Peter telling the story years later at a pub in Jerusalem? There I was, minding my own business, trying to catch some fish, when here he comes, this wandering wise man, literally tumbling into my boat, and he looks up at me, and what does he say? This townie from the highlands? “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets!” Like he knows anything about fishing! Like he’d ever even been on a boat before!

Now we all know how this goes. Despite having done their best all night long with their nets coming up empty, suddenly, inexplicably, miraculously, Simon Peter pulls up a catch so abundant it fills two boats and threatens to sink them. Wonderful! But there’s a deeper nuance to this tale that is easy to miss. Fishing was a major industry in this part of ancient Judea, and a highly valuable one, which meant it was also highly and rigorously taxed by the occupying Roman Empire. Like many lucrative industries today that have at their base the hard, grueling, manual labor of unskilled and undereducated workers, those at the bottom bore the brunt of this exploitative arrangement. Think of those creative, daring young men we’ve all seen pictures of in recent news stories braving the entirely unstable, claustrophobic, man-made tunnels in the Democratic Republic of Congo to mine the coltan that helps power our phones, computers, and a
myriad of devices popular in the digital age. They are often paid pennies for spending days on end in dark, unventilated, dangerous caves: caves that often collapse under their own weight; caves where many of their friends have lost their lives; caves filled with dangerous and even lethal gasses. And then the companies who buy that precious metal turn them around for a pretty profit, and we, the consumers at the end of the chain, get to check Facebook when we feel like it and keep track of how many steps we’ve taken each day, not to mention make the occasional call and store our home movies and such.

Peter and the first disciples were like those miners. They went out on a dangerous sea, where storms often came out of nowhere; a sea without a coastguard at watch, in handmade, homemade boats with ragged nets, to catch a highly-valued form of protein much beloved by the people of nearby cities like Tiberas and Capernaum, not to mention the elites in Jerusalem. This was not boutique work. It was hard, dirty labor, and in case this detail escaped you, it was not going well. The wife was home with a cough and the baby had a fever, but the men had been on the sea all night – ALL NIGHT – trying to catch just one measly fish. They were not dedicated idealists. They were desperate, and poor, and hungry, and scared, and along comes this wild teacher presuming to tell them how to do their job. It would be enough to enrage a man if it weren’t for the fact that the nets pulled in such a load, such a beautiful bounty. And suddenly, with all those slippery fins slapping around the floorboards, Peter and the others saw their debts paid, saw their wives getting much needed medicine, saw their babies wrapped up in clean, warm blankets, and it was too much for them. This wasn’t about fish. It was about freedom. Jesus had changed the course of their futures. Jesus had, in that one catch, made it possible for them to walk away and know everything would be OK, that everyone would be taken care of.

And in that moment, do you think Peter felt himself worthy of such a miracle? Deserving of such lavish good luck? No. It set in keen relief the darkness he tried to hide deep within – the anger, the stubbornness, the pride, the cowardice, all of which will continue to be on display as his friendship with Jesus unfolds – and he falls down before Jesus, repenting, saying only “I am a sinful man.” I don’t deserve this, he is saying. It is too much. Too good. Surely you have the wrong guy.

Maybe we tell ourselves and each other, “God helps those who help themselves,” because it is just so overwhelming to name the truth: that God just helps, no matter our willingness or ability to ourselves. The the confessions and repentance and amendment of life stuff, the serving
and the going and the doing, always seems to come after God has *already* shown up to flip our lives and our miseries on their heads. That God helps us precisely when we can’t help ourselves. That maybe this whole God thing isn’t at all about our becoming worthy, but about our becoming free.

And how does Jesus respond to all of these people, when God’s goodness sets their weakness in sharp relief? By saying, “do not be afraid,” and sending them on their way to gift others the freedom revealed to us in God’s self-giving love. Do not be afraid, God says, in the face of our insecurity, our pride, our fear, our lack, our smallness. There is work to be done. And I have chosen you. What a gift. *Amen.*