

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, as we near the end of the Christmas season, we evaluate its effect on our lives. We welcome the Christ child once again to our world. Nevertheless, God, we recognize this is not once-and-for-all but happens time and again. Although we accept Christ as our Lord once, we need to continually reorient ourselves to you, Holy God. When we neglect our neighbor, we need to welcome the Christ again. When we slander another made in the Image of God, we need to welcome the Christ again. Let us never forget these lessons, as we commit and recommit ourselves to the Christ's ministry. As we do, hear all those burdens on our hearts, those spoken here and still residing within, that keep us from focusing on the Christ or that take us away from living in the present moment. We entrust them to your holy care, our loving Creator, and ask your guidance to live faithfully each day.

Gracious Lord of All, we hear the words of scripture affirming a fact we continuously affirm as the church: the Word of God has come into our world to change us and all of creation. As we remember this miraculous coming, we seek to focus ourselves on the true Word of God. Help us to keep all things in their appropriate place, using the words of Holy Scripture to continually center on the Word of the man and God incarnate, Jesus Christ, and to lead a faithful life into the world. We pray all these things in the name of the True Word, who gives life to all, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

SERMON

Have you ever tried to put together one of those inexpensive furniture sets, like a side table or TV stand? You literally have a wooden LEGO set, without any of the fun that LEGOs provide. There are about six hundred and three pieces, and each one with their specialized code, going from A to Z and beyond. First you need to find panel A and connect

it to panel C with bolt 5RRR and nut 6YYY. All the directions they have can drive you insane. Indeed, you have two choices. You can stick to those directions like glue: keep your nose in those directions until you have it scientifically figured out how and why each of the directions is written. This usually goes on for five or so hours before you finally start to figure out what is the right way to go, only to find that it's time to go to bed. On the other hand, you can use the directions as a guide, not necessarily having it all figured out but referencing them every now and then to make sure you are on the right track. On the one hand, the directions become an end in themselves; on the other hand, we find that the directions can point us in the right way as long as we are faithfully keeping our sights on the end goal, which, in this case, is a lovely new piece of furniture.

The directions can be consuming. Some are sticklers for following the directions, wanting to do them exactly piece-by-piece. Those sticklers soon find out that the directions have become their own goal, and the spirit behind the directions is lost when we are so stuck to them we forget to adapt. Others follow them more freely, knowing the direction they provide but not needing to follow everything word-by-word to get the point. Yet, no matter how one utilizes the directions, they are always the beginning of the journey, never the end. We can have the same struggle in the Christian life. We proclaim a Living God, but we can get caught up in doing the right thing so much that we have paralysis by analysis. We can get so stuck in the directions that we forget to live well in light of the Gospel every moment, every day. We can get so stuck in figuring out every aspect of the written word that we forget that we serve the spirit of the Living Word. That Living Word is the man Jesus Christ, who has come, who is come, who is to come. As this season of Christmas soon

comes to an end, let us reorient to the Living Word as we look at John's poetic statement of the Word coming into the world and live our lives in light of that coming.

Each Gospel reading has its unique perspective, but few passages in scripture are more poetic than the beginning of the Gospel According to John. There is no story of Jesus' birth here. There is something much more universal that extends to before the creation of the Universe. "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus Christ surpasses Creation, for Jesus is God becoming a human being. This is not only poetic to our English ears, it meant a lot to the early Christians with their Greek ears. In Greek, the word here is "logos." This Logos is the power behind everything. In other words, this text is claiming something important, and keeping our eyes on the Logos, the Eternal Word, brings us to understand what we are supposed to do.

If there's one part of the passage to take with us everyday, it is John the Baptist. He is our example. John points to someone greater, laying down his own ego to carry out that mission. John the Baptist follows the path of the Gospel of John and its ultimate point. It says he was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, instead, was coming into the world. This passage at the beginning of John is saying what the point is. The Gospel is the Gospel only because of the person behind the story. Like the rest of John's Gospel and every character that comes our way, it testifies to the True Word coming into the world. This is our focus; this is our calling. This life is about testifying to the True Word coming into the world and utilizing all we have to do so.

But there is a distinction to be made here. When we hear how we are meant to live in the Word of God and point back to the Word, we immediately think of scripture. It is, so to speak, the instruction book we have for living the Christian life. And indeed we should

focus on scripture, for it is how we come to understand the True Word of God the Gospel speaks of. But the two are not the same; scripture is a messenger. Scripture is the John the Baptist that delivers the true message, the true Gospel: God has come to the earth as a human being, as Jesus Christ. Jesus preached, Jesus taught about how we are to live as children of God, Jesus Christ was crucified, and Jesus Christ rose again. Just like John the Baptist, scripture testifies to these things, but scripture only points the way. Scripture is not the light but testifies to the light. When we abuse scripture, we lose the distinction.

Like Ikea furniture, we can't live our lives with the focus on the directions. Does anyone say, after building a beautiful cabinet or bookstand or model, "Look, I followed the directions!" No, it's foolish. No player playing football would say, "Hey, Coach, I ran the play just as you drew it up!" even though it had no result. Players don't care about that. We don't follow the directions to follow directions. Like directions for anything, from a new bookstand to changing oil in a car, they are a means to an end, not the end in itself. The directions lead you to do the right things to gain the ultimate goal. You don't get a reward for following the directions: the reward is the new, beautiful work coming out of the effort.

In our case, scripture is the instruction book of life. The words of scripture only have power because there is a greater word, the Word of God, and there is a greater goal, God's service. In today's world, scripture can be abused by making it in itself more important than the power behind it. It may seem so easy not to do this, but this is a subtle danger I'm consistently reminded of when I hear it used very badly. Three of the best or worst words that we can ever use are simple: "The Bible says." These are three words that can lift up or tear far down. These are three words that can give life or kill it right off. These are three words that can invite or shut people down to the Gospel all together. And,

just like scripture, it all depends on how we use them. Scripture never testifies to itself but the True Word. When we use scripture badly, we are not testifying to the True Word; we are utilizing scripture like a bat. This bat injures ourselves and others. Some can get so nitpicky with following the words of scripture that there is no joy in life, no focus on faithful service in the One it describes. If we use scripture like a bat, we will soon find that we are not being welcoming. We are not focused on bringing people to the Living Word. We are focused on our own agendas. Unlike some loud and boisterous voices, we are not always “in the right” when we use scripture to further a point. We never serve God when we tear others down with scripture’s words. That’s not Jesus Christ at work. We only have to look as far as the Pharisees, for they tried to use the words of scripture against Jesus, the True Word. We all know they were fighting for their own agendas and it was apparent. When that happens, scripture is utilized as nothing less than an idol, indeed, an idol, because scripture has become more important than faithful service in the One it testifies to.

The spirit of this passage is knowing how to live in its light. Knowing the directions inside and out is no victory. We get no reward for following scripture in itself. The Gospel itself is yelling out here, “Look, I am not the point! This Word is the point!” Scripture points to the service of following the True Word of Jesus Christ. When we follow the directions while not keeping our sights on the ultimate goal, we serve the written word without the spirit of the Living Word. If we are using the written word to build up our neighbor, to love the unloved, to care for those we’d rather not care for, we are serving the Word that brings life to all. Our words will lift up. They will not focus on what we want others to do or be. We will be the conduit of the Light that comes into the World.

Like furniture, we ultimately need to build something from the instructions. We need to turn the directions to the actions, to building something that lasts. We need to turn the words of the instructions to how we live each and every day. That is fullness of life living for the Word that John the Baptist and the Gospel of John attests to here. There are beautiful fruits that sprout when we are attuned to the Living Word of God. When we are oriented to the Word, the Word of Jesus Christ, then we serve with the right spirit. I heard a wonderful interview lately with the Rev. James Martin, who spoke about how he found God working in his life. He wasn't speaking particularly about this passage, but his wisdom stuck with it. He spoke about the word "religious" and many religious people he knew. What happens when we hear that word? To me, it speaks of dry, and it did to him too. He spoke of many people he knew who are very religious, committed people who were, frankly, grim and joyless. "Religious," especially in today's world, harkens to those that are more focused on following rules and doing things exactly right that they miss the joy in life. And, frankly, sometimes when people find out that I am a pastor, that is the role they need to see themselves in. This is not someone I can joke with. I have to be serious because he is serious. I have to be good because he's a pastor after all, and their focus is on being good and spotless at all times. No, that's not the way I roll. I don't want to be seen as that person, but as living with joy and vulnerable at the same time.

Here's a question he asked I think is quite appropriate to this message: how often do we think of Jesus or any of the heroes of scripture smiling or laughing? How often do we think of them joyful and full of life? Sure, this is serious stuff, but he has a point here. We don't. They are often dry and serious like many people think religious people out to act. For goodness sake, says Rev. Martin, let's not forget that Jesus' very first miracle was

turning water into wine at a wedding. A wedding, one of the greatest celebrations of all. The Gospel, he says, isn't the long chapters of the books we find in the bible but one simple underlying message: Jesus Christ is risen! This is the most joyful message of all. The books were only written down because people wanted to know and share the full story. We forget that main point, so well summarized in John 10:10, and Jesus says: "I," that is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the Word that brought forth all of Creation and each one of us sitting here today, "I came that they may have LIFE, and have it abundantly." Friends, this is the point. This is the focus of joy. Jesus Christ, the Word behind the word, came not that we may follow dry directions. He came that we may find life abundant through his coming and faithful orientation to the life and ministry he provides. After all, I cannot imagine God meeting us after our days are done and checking off commandments but asking us, "Did you live and did you serve me with the abundant life I offer?"

This passage from John's Gospel is powerful because it reorients us to the point of our reading, being, and doing. The end, the reason we live, the reason we learn and follow scripture, the reason we serve is the True Word. This is Jesus Christ, the Word of God that gives life and love to all people. This is the Word that gives life to the written word. Scripture is the beginning point, the direction, that helps us attune to the Living Word, and we then we go forth to serve the Living Word in the world everyday. Follow the directions not as an end itself, but that we may create something beautiful together that honors our Lord and God. Thanks be to God for the Living Word that empowers everything, from the Holy Words of Scripture to our daily lives! Amen and Amen.