

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 24, 2021

Psalm 62:1–12 (ESV): 1 For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.

2 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

3 How long will all of you attack a man
to batter him,
like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

4 They only plan to thrust him down from his high position.
They take pleasure in falsehood.
They bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. Selah

5 For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.

6 He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

7 On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

8 Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah

9 Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

10 Put no trust in extortion;
set no vain hopes on robbery;

if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

11 Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
12 and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.
For you will render to a man
according to his work.

First Reading: Jonah 3:1–5; 10 (ESV):

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

3 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 7:29–35 (ESV):

29 This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. 32 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 1:14–20 (ESV):

Jesus Begins His Ministry

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, **15** and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

16 Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. **17** And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” **18** And immediately they left their nets and followed him. **19** And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. **20** And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Sermon 4 – Third Sunday After Epiphany

“Let Your World Die”

1 Corinthians 7:29-35

Dear friends,

Ever feel like you're running out of time? I do. Paul does absolutely nothing to help this perception in our epistle lesson, though truth be told that is not his purpose. The concept of shortened timeframe is something the New Testament talks about a fair bit. There's this sense among the saints in those days that Jesus is due back any minute now, which is puzzling when you look back on it two thousand years later. This expanded reading goes on in even more odd directions, because not only does Paul think that something is about to happen when it very clearly has not, but Paul's way of coping with

this thing that doesn't happen seems to involve cutting off your human relationships that the Scriptures elsewhere encourage us to participate in. So what is all this about? Three things: Attitude, the troubles that go along with attitude, and the finally this is about the first commandment.

Paul is writing to the Corinthians, a congregation with more than their fair share of problems, and he has in the previous chapters begun addressing those problems and those questions one by one. So this reading comes in the middle of that. The Corinthians have asked him stuff, he is answering, and he is being clear when it comes to his opinions and what Christ actually commands them to do, which is nice. The Corinthians were about to face some very serious persecution, all Roman Christians were, Paul sees this coming about a mile away and some of his words, which sound strange, are about that.

“29 This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short.” This is where Paul addresses this directly. Is he talking about Christ's return? Probably. Is he talking about the upcoming persecution of Christians? Probably that too. Either one fits and neither is mutually exclusive. As I said, the early church thinks Jesus is coming back any minute, and that is true despite the amount of time that has passed. God doesn't look at time like we do, which is becoming clearer to me every second I spend in 2021, if not any more appealing, and to God a thousand years is like a day and so on. Furthermore, the Bible tells us very clearly that we are living in the last days right now, since we don't know when exactly Jesus is coming back. We are living in that moment perpetually until it comes, which is awkward as heck to actually live out in a meaningful way, but that's what Paul's next words are addressing. The persecution is coming, Paul says, so get ready. How do you get ready? By getting your head in the game. How do I do that?

“From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.” Okay Paul so you

basically want me to lie. That's what I'm getting out of this, that's what the plain meaning says, doesn't it? I'm supposed to pretend my wife isn't my wife. Sure I'll get right on that. I'm supposed to pretend I'm not sad for the people I've lost. I'm supposed to pretend that I don't care about my stuff and that I don't live here.

This is hard to explain, because I'm still figuring this out myself. I have repeatedly said to you that none of this is the point. Not this world, not this life, not the things or the people in it. Our destination, our destiny, our home is in the new world that Jesus is creating, with Him and His saints for all eternity. We are encouraged by Christ to keep this in mind at all times. Got it. But how do you actually do that? God also tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to be good citizens, to act as though the evils of this world actually matter and we should actually address them. He doesn't tell us to turn up our nose at our life and I don't even know how we could. We're still stuck here, despite all the years we have been, so what do we do?

Answering that question is nuanced. This is what we have to do now, no doubt about it. But this, what we do now, is, for lack of any better word, pathetic and kind of stupid. This life can really be awful, and can really show us some awful things. This world is the same, and the people who live in it the same. Sin makes us this way, and sin makes us completely helpless to change it in any meaningful way without breaking something else. God continually presents us with two obligations that should, by all rights, cancel each other out. He tells us not to care about what happens in the here and now, and also to care very much for the people that live in the here and now. How do we do that?

All I can give you is what I've learned. Acceptance is not the same thing as giving up. Make of that what you will. To accept our lot here in this world is something God wants to do, and He wants us to be clear-eyed about it, don't try to make it nicer than it is. Sometimes the times are good, sometimes they're so good you just want to freeze time. Sometimes the times are bad, and you find yourself scrambling for a fast-forward button, or trying as hard as you can not to be present in them, or feel anything, because

doing so is just intolerable. God wants us to take that, keep it the way it is, but never forget that better is in store. God is not asking you to abandon any hopes or dreams you have for this world. You care about people in the world and that's good, God likes that. He just wants you to temper them with the knowledge that none of it will last. Again, to me one of those should cancel out the other, which is why it's so maddening to figure out a sane, healthy way to live this out. Acceptance is not the same as giving up or giving in. We're not supposed to tell God that none of this matters just destroy the whole thing when it clearly does. We're not supposed to be so laser focused on this world that we forget that we belong to Christ, that we forget the New Earth he has promised us. **“For the present form of this world is passing away.”**

It's a matter of attitude. Does it matter? Yes. Does it matter more than anything else? No. Jesus does, because Jesus is eternal life, and when we die that will be all that matters. But we're not dead yet, we're still here, and so things here still matter, we still have our worries and our frustrations and we still have to survive the whole experience with our faith intact. Paul goes on in this vein. **“32 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. 35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”**

This is where the first commandment comes in. The First Commandment tells us to fear, love, and trust in God above all other things. It does *not* tell us to only fear God, only trust God, only love God. Paul makes it sound like He wants to disconnect you from the world, and from the people that mean the most to you, but Paul is just pointing out how sin has so infected this world that even those relationships that are most meaningful

to you come with a heck of a jagged pill to swallow. Each one of you fits one of these descriptions. Whether you are alone, married, or some weird in-between state, you are still a sinner, part of this world, and that means you're pulled in two different directions. We have hopes, dreams, aspirations for the here and now. We have things we want, things we need, things we pray for every day, many of them involving people in the here and now. That pulls you one way, God pulls you another, demanding your highest allegiance, your highest loyalty, even when it hurts the ones you love most. That is what being a Christian is like, Paul is telling you. It's all normal. The tension, the divided loyalties, our sin means that anything we do in this world is something we get way too attached to, put too much hope in, or want too badly. This is who we are. We try to draw the line, but it ends up running down the middle of us most of the time.

How do we handle it? I've been wrestling with this for most of the past two years, and the only thing I've learned is this: Just let it go. Somehow. I don't really know how, but just tell God, I can't be this person. I'm torn in two between what you need me to do and what I need here on this earth. I'm torn in two between my love for this country and my abject disgust as to what it's become. I'm torn in two between what you make me do and how what you make me do hurts my family. I hate it, I can't handle it, and I need you to take it on for me. Sometimes, when God is merciful, he'll resolve the tension for a while, but it always comes back. That's what it means to be Christian, to live in two worlds, to be two people, to want two different things that seem like they can't co-exist in the same life. We want a good life, we want something to write home about, but we know in our hearts that God's will is sovereign, only what He says matters, and so we try to submit to that will, but that will hurts like the fires of hell some days, and by gum it's our life. We belong to God but we're the ones who actually have to live with His will, have to suffer His teaching and decrees, and that tension is representative of that.

Just let it go. How? By telling God you can't live with it. You can't live as a child of God and a child of this world. By telling God that you are a sinner, and you can't do it on

our own. By telling God you don't want to be a sinner anymore, you don't want to doubt Him, you want to trust, but you don't know how to trust Him when the darkest hour is coming and you can't see the sunshine, you can't even see the dawn. Stand fast in the peace that Christ gives you, the peace which passes all understand. Don't conquer. Don't expedition. Don't sally forth in glory. Just stand firm. It is hard to stand, harder still to stand in a state that you can barely tolerate. God isn't asking for a miracle from you. He isn't asking you to figure it out on your own, He isn't asking you to make it all better yourself. He's asking you to own up to the fact that you *can't* handle this anymore, that you can't make it better, that you can't do better.

He wants that. He wants your guilt, your sin, your fear, your compulsive need for control. He wants your dreams, your ambitions, your relationships. He wants your need. He wants your trust, and He isn't demanding it from you, He's offering it to you. He wants your bad so He can take it away and give you His good. He wants your fear so He can give you His peace, even if it is so fleeting and so temporary. He wants your sin so He can give you His righteousness. The present form of this world is passing away. Rather than standing back and watching it burn, He wants us to work harder than ever, while never forgetting that none of it matters. If that seems like a whole bunch of contradictory nonsense, well, welcome to Christianity. We believe that God became man and was crucified.

It won't make sense. He will. He promises to make sense to you, to take it from you, and to give you Himself.

Amen.