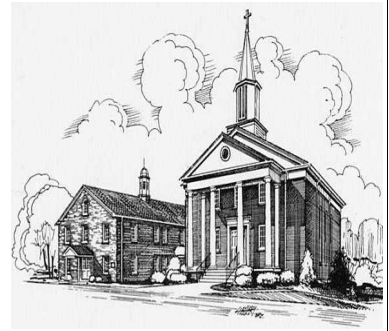


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to August 24

Proper 16
Year B
RCL



Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Psalms 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

The Collect

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

SERMON

Last Sunday I spoke about Joseph Campbell and myth. I wanted to move us away from the contemporary use of the word – a made up story that primitive people adopt to explain lightning bolts – to an understanding that would permit us to read Scripture in greater depth. As I recall, many of the saints' heads were tilted quizzically. Many were scratched with puzzlement, and lo! the word went out within the church, and the word was this: “What in Heaven's name is he on about this time?” This Sunday, you get to find out how important words, and the concepts they represent, can be as we walk a while with the unknown author of the letter we call Ephesians. The author of Ephesians is going to tell us something surprising and disturbing. If we are to understand what he has to say, we will have to reclaim familiarity with the language of the spirit – the language in which the great mysteries are revealed to us in Scripture.

Underlying the language of the spirit is a shared understanding which allows us to communicate with each other and to read Scripture with understanding. Without that shared understanding, we can't understand either each other or Scripture. To see what is lost, pick someone at random and speak to them, as Ephesians does, about devils, “the cosmic powers of this present darkness”, or “the spiritual forces of evil” and watch how quickly eyes roll and watches are consulted. “Gee, that's interesting! But I have a um...meeting.” We're pretty sure that anyone who would speak in this way is a little soft in the head, at least compared to our own, enlightened, selves yet there is no contemporary language which can express these great mysteries better. If we wish to engage the issues raised in Ephesians we have to reconnect with the language of Ephesians.

My impression is that an awful lot of informal religious discussion today consists of prowling about in contemporary understanding for a way to portray that which the language of Ephesians once did so effortlessly. If we have cast terms like “devils”, “the cosmic powers of this present darkness”, and “the spiritual forces of evil” onto the scrapheap of mere superstition, how are we to address the ideas once referenced by these terms? Remember that God tells us

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.”¹

We may say to God, “I don't understand. Could you put that in contemporary language?” because we seek an easy way out, but contemporary language has banished the very words we need to understand what is being said. We're defeated before we begin.

¹ Isaiah 55:8

If we're clear on that, let's take a look at Ephesians and find the disturbing and surprising thing I promised you. Here it is:

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our author is telling us something vital we need to understand, but which we misinterpret because we put our own contemporary spin on it. When he speaks of rulers and authorities and the cosmic powers of the present darkness, we understand him to be speaking of Rome and the people opposing the new church. What else could he mean? That's the only interpretation our understanding will permit. But our author clearly says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh." He's not talking about Romans, or Pharisees or anyone of blood and flesh. He is speaking of evil as a force for destruction and death. The problem of misinterpretation is ours, not his.

Once, four blind men were introduced to an elephant. One touched the side of the elephant and said, "An elephant is like a great wall." One grasped the elephant's great leg and said, "An elephant is like a tree." The third touched the elephant's trunk and pronounced an elephant to be like a snake. The final man addressed the elephant's tail and said, "You are all wrong. An elephant is like a great rope hanging down from above. When you pull upon it, the heavens open up with filth." Until we reacquaint ourselves with the language of the spirit, we are going to make spiritual mistakes, to the harm of God's creation. Adjusting our understanding and confessing our complicity in the misunderstanding which is allowing evil in the world to go unchecked is vital.

Opening our minds to the words of Ephesians means that we will be forced to engage once again the question of evil. Dr. N.T. Wright puts it best:

... somehow, despite the horrific battles of Mons and the Somme during World War I, despite Auschwitz and Buchenwald, ... people still continue to this day to suppose that the world is basically a good place and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, "development" in the sense of "Westernization," and the application, to more and more regions, of Western democracy ...

"This state of affairs has led to three things in particular which I see as characterizing the new problem of evil. First, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result."²

2 I am indebted, both for these thoughts and these words, to N.T. Wright's book, "Evil and God's Justice"

Now, we can get to the heart of the misunderstanding. When we speak of evil, we understand it to be the things that bad people do. That is the most cowardly approach imaginable, for it allows us the fiction that evil has no existence beyond the people who do evil. Thus, we permit ourselves to believe that we need only remove the bad people and evil will be defeated. The writer of Ephesians stridently disagrees.

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

It is not us against the bad guys. It is all of God's children joining in opposition to the forces that empower us to come up with good reasons for doing bad things. When we imagine that evil is just the things the bad guys do, we are denying evil's separate existence. When it turns out that even people we approve of are capable of doing evil things, we're surprised, and when we're surprised we often react in immature ways. Again, Dr. Wright says it well:

"The terrorist actions of Al-Qaeda were and are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that the United States as a whole was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (particularly Americans and Israelis), and that the latter had a responsibility now to punish the former, is a large-scale example of what I'm talking about just as it is immature and naive to suggest the mirror image of this view, namely that the Western world is guilty in all respects, and that all protesters and terrorists are therefore completely justified in what they do."³

Until we admit our culpability and reclaim our comfort with the language of the spirit, we will not understand the letter to the Ephesians, and we will doom ourselves to endless repetitions of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, September 11 and Nagasaki. Heed the word of the Lord in this letter, church, for God offers choice, never compromise.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

³ Ibid.

Choose this day, church, who you will serve, the Lord or your contemporary understanding of the world. Choose wisely who your gods are.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Sometimes, I wish I could just stand up here, sing “Jesus Loves Me”, and assure you that God is up to the task of providing everything you want. I can’t do that. I’m charged with preaching the Word of the Spirit, and that’s not the same thing at all. The writer of Ephesians closed today with these words:

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Pray for all the saints, and pray for me also, so that I may speak truly.

Until we meet again, may the love of God the Father, the Grace of God the Son, and the communion of God the Holy Spirit abide with you, this day, and forever more.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2015 J. Stewart Schneider
