

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
7 August 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

When I read this passage about being ready when the master comes home from the wedding banquet and the slaves are there to open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks, I'm reminded of an experience I had many, many decades ago when I went to Mexico to study Spanish in a wonderful little town called Cuernavaca, known as the City of Eternal Spring - not only because of its temperate climate but other accidents of natural beauty there. It attracts a lot of wealthy *gringos* among whom in those days was Helen Hayes. I knew the man who was subbing at the Episcopal Church there which of course worshiped in English. He had been invited to stay in the home of a man named Howe Noble. You know him because your name is in the same book as his. He was in the Blue Book, the social register in Philadelphia. We're all in there, aren't we. *[laughter]*

Well, you know what houses are like in Mexico, especially for the wealthy. They're all surrounded with very high walls. There's broken glass on the top of the walls to keep those people who aren't supposed to be in there out. I remember bits and pieces of the house. I remember being surrounded by beautiful 18th century Philadelphia antiques in Mexico. A lovely large beautiful pool which was cleaned every day. All the leaves were picked up by the pool man. Nobody ever swam in it.

Howe's wife had died shortly before, I believe, and he was busy on a world cruise to occupy himself. The priest who was serving the Episcopal Church who was my friend, a man by the name of Galen Poole - I think he was from Texas - would have me over occasionally for a meal. Every time we had a meal we sat at a different place at the table because the servants didn't want Mr. Noble ever to be bored. So every meal his place at the table moved.

The point of all of this is that Galen and I would be out in a car - his car - and the entrance to the house was through steel doors on a sort of what we would call an alley. There wasn't much space on either side of the car. It may have been something like a Ford Mustang. I believe it was a rag top. We would come down that little alleyway and, as we would get near to Mr. Noble's mansion, the door would automatically open. This was not an automatic garage door opener, but every time we got close to the door, it opened. I said to Galen, "*How does this happen?*" Well, needless to say, there were slaves inside, one of whom lay by the door and recognized the sound of the motor of that car. How's that for being ready? Unbelievable! And it was flawless because my recollection is that every time we came down that alleyway that door opened.

Being ready is something I'm not good at. You may know I'm leaving tomorrow for a long journey, and I spent most of yesterday trying to pack the suitcase. My job after mass this morning is to go back and re-pack. *[laughter]* I will be delighted when sometime tomorrow I get out of the house and finally chose the door and utter, "*What I have I have and what I have not I have not.*" I always have my passport with me. This is my theory about passports: It is always in my wallet and that's because if anybody ever comes to me and says, "*Do you want to go somewhere? I have a ticket,*" I can go. *[laughter]* I'll call you from there. I don't want to have to go looking for the thing.

I remember Vancouver. Larry and Sonna and James and I went on an Alaskan cruise. I knew I had everything with me. Do you think I could find my passport when it was time to emigrate? I couldn't find it. I had put it inside my shirt. It was down in here somewhere. I eventually had to half undress before I found the thing. I was really nervous.

But being ready is not one of the things I'm good at. I don't particularly resonate very well with Advent which is always a season of getting ready because I'm never ready. But apparently God is always ready, and God's goodness and God's grace are always there for us.

By the way, did you see that thing about the thief in the gospel reading? Just to give you a sense of how scripture might be put together. There is a completely irrelevant sentence about if the guy knew when the thief was coming. Where did that come from? Well, there was probably a bunch of words that were the same and somebody had snippets of biblical passages and they decided, "*Oh, we'll put that one in there because it has to do with being prepared and opening the door.*" But the thief is completely irrelevant to anything that's being said.

Just to sophisticate you a little bit about where scripture comes from, it's not a magic book that fell out of the sky sometime. It's subject over the centuries to redaction, editing, interpretation, assemblage, preservation, and we're learning now in biblical scholarship, parts of it have been suppressed. There's a lot of literature out there that we haven't seen or heard of because the Church said, "*That's not what we think.*" So things got lost, suppressed, excluded, etc.

But more important for me today is the Isaiah text. It's an extraordinary text. Isaiah is speaking for God and saying strange things about God. *What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I don't give a flip about your worship.* And then he goes on to explain: *I do not delight in the blood of bulls. I have had enough of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?* We could even say, Who cares if you're here every week? Who cares how much you put in the offering plate? Who cares whether or not you know the rubrics of the Episcopal Church? Who cares whether or not you read the gospel after the epistle after the Old Testament lesson? Who cares whether or not the opening Collect is said at the right time? Who cares?

Well, you may know that I have studied and have an advanced degree in liturgical studies. *I care!* I wanted to know more about it. I'm enjoying this stuff. I like to know what's right and wrong and where it comes from and why we do what we do. I like to figure out what vestments are all about and all the pots and pans we use at the altar. I care, and it's fun to teach and talk about. But apparently *God* doesn't care, or at least as far as we've read.

Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. Well, you know in my first parish I went home smelling like a smoked mackerel every Sunday because we used incense galore, and I loved it. I taught people to use it. I even got a German-speaking congregation to use it! And don't you know, after the eight o'clock service somebody said to me, "*Can we use incense?*" Well, of course we can, but there's no place to swing it in a closed room with a complaining choir and people who are breathing compromised. But we can use it. Does it smell good? Yeah. Is it liturgically correct? Of course. Well, can we just use it at Christmas? I said, "*Well, if you're going to use it at Christmas, use it all the time.*" You know how it goes.

Here's God upset about all these things. *When you stretch out your hands, I will not look at you. I will hide my eyes.* This is God speaking according to Isaiah's prophecy. *Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.*

So all of this stuff we come here to do - and a lot of people do it because our style, our format of worship is recognizable pretty much around the world. You can go to a mass at St. Peter's in Rome and know exactly what's going on. Even some Lutheran Churches are similar - not always, but often. Even Methodists would say, "*Oh, well we do that.*" The big difference might be between the Western and Eastern Churches. The Orthodox Church liturgies are way more complex than ours, but beautiful. And here's God saying, "*I don't care. I don't care.*"

Instead God says, *Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil.* What does it mean to cease to do evil? Well, God's not stupid enough to tell you what *not* to do without telling you *what* to do. And here is what to do - God speaking through Isaiah: *Learn to do good. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.* Widows don't have the terrible reputations in our society that they used to have then. They were seen as a burden on society because women, as you know, don't have any value unless they're attached to a man who is wealthy. Read some of Edith Wharton's literature like *The House of Mirth*, the story of Lily Bart whose life is a descending trajectory because of her need for a man for her importance and her wealth, and each one is successively lower and less acceptable. It ends up in suicide and the murder of her infant. An extraordinary story, beautifully told.

These are the things to do, and Isaiah is suggesting that God says, "*To worship me appropriately and in a fashion that I'm interested in, you have to take care of other people and take care of those who are in need - not just your own kind, not just your own level, not just your own economic group.*" Worship has to do way less with how we decide we're going to do things when we gather than how we will treat each other when we meet whenever and wherever we meet.

The best example I have of this happened right in this room. A couple years ago you may remember that I was forbidden to preach in a neighboring church because of the pastor whom I did not know - her perception of me and my sexuality, etc., etc., etc. When that happened I wrote to her boss. I think the Methodists refer to them as a district superintendent. She was away when my letter came and when the letter came she was very anxious to

speak to me personally. I was out one day and I remember I came in and James said, “*Would you please call this woman. She’s called three times already.*” So I called her back, and she wanted immediately to come to me. She was desperate. I said, “*That’s fine. I’ll come meet with you.*” So I did. When I met with her I think we spent three hours together. It felt like twenty minutes. But the long and short of that meeting was her desire to apologize to me personally and to you, the congregation, publicly. I said, “*Well, why don’t you just come some Sunday and worship with us. Bring your vestment.*” She was delighted, and it wasn’t long after that that she came.

You may remember her visit here. It was a lovely, beautiful time. James and I had her to lunch after the ten o’clock mass, and at our dining room table she said this to us: “*You know, I came to your church with a prepared speech all written out, but I folded it up and put it in my pocket and didn’t refer to it when I spoke publicly because I saw how your people greeted each other and treated each other at the door of the church before they ever got into the sanctuary.*” She witnessed true worship being exercised by you in how you care for each other. It had nothing to do with knowing the rules of when to ring bells, whether or not to lift bread or put it down, whether or not to put water in the wine in the chalice, whether or not to wash your hands properly, whether or not to sing this hymn or that hymn in this season or that season. It had nothing to do with any of that.

Isaiah gets it. The worship of God has to do with how people relate to other people. And that’s the only way we can worship God. This is rehearsal for that, or ought to be. Now you and I have all had the experience that this can sometimes be the fight of the week. But Isaiah understands something long before we ever get to the birth of Jesus. Isaiah understands the incarnation, the business of God living in the world in flesh, in human flesh, and in the human flesh of every other living human being in the world.

And so it is that sometimes it happens - and we’ve all done it. I know I have - that people who know the right thing to do in worship, they know all the rules, get upset about people who don’t care, don’t know or wouldn’t do it that way and take the attitude that “*I’m better, I know better.*” After all, friends, I spent a lot of money to get an advanced degree in liturgical studies. Do I stand first in the line? No. [laughter] You know what I mean.

To use our liturgical sophistication as a club to beat somebody else over the head who doesn’t do it our way is missing the point of worship entirely. What we do together here in our stylized behaviors is to listen to God and to receive God into ourselves, to equip ourselves, to encounter other people in the world and believe and teach and confess that somehow even in those people who may be my enemy is the possibility of the encounter with the living God. That a Democrat might see that possibility in a Republican is the biggest exercise of the moment. Or vice versa. And to have the discussion is exactly what God is after. Did you hear in the lesson today from Isaiah God says, “*Come on now, let us argue it out.*” He doesn’t say, “*Let us kill each other.*” God is saying, “*You have behaviors that you think are holy and righteous and that please me, and they don’t.*” But he doesn’t say to them, “*You’re dead wrong. Get out of here.*” He says, “*Let’s talk about this. Let me teach you something. Run the risk of learning. Run the risk of acquiring an idea about the will of God.*”

Can we run the risk of having it out with God, of really listening to what God has to say to us about how we worship and how God can really be discovered and encountered in this world? And it’s not with people of our own kind. It has nothing to do with people of power. It has nothing to do with people of wealth. It has nothing to do with people in or out of office. It has to do with how we treat each other. *Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan.* Taking care of kids costs money. This is asking for an investment in something other than ourselves.

I find justice hard to advocate for when I’m OK. I’m doing fine. I learned this in the late 60s and early 70s. Do you remember when the world smelled like marijuana? I had a brother in Viet Nam, and I was in seminary in a 4D deferred category in Chicago. I went to Chicago the year after the Chicago Democratic Convention riots. My classmates had hard hats with red crosses on them for when they went to help the people injured in the streets. On Saturday mornings we used to go to old disused synagogues and these were huge houses of worship - two or three thousand people. And I would sit down with three thousand black people from the slums in Chicago who were being taught about advocating for justice for themselves and everybody else by a wildly attractive young man whose name was Jesse Jackson in a city where somebody by the name of Saul Alinsky was very active in the business of organizing poor people to advocate for justice.

And here is Isaiah saying that’s what you do when you worship. Seek for others what it is that you have that is good and share it and bear the expense of that because that’s the only way I can be worshiped. Killing fatted

calves smells bad, even to God. Unless we're engaged in the business of seeing in every other human being the potentiality of an encounter with God, we're missing the point of worship entirely, and are probably, according to Isaiah, not worshipping at all. We're going through a self-righteous exercise that makes us feel good for helping the rest of the world.

Plead for the widow. Come on now. Argue it out. God is not satisfied with, "*Now we just have to agree to disagree on this one.*" Worship here is important because it allows us to have it out with God and with each other, and it allows us to come to some kind of agreement that our job is to do what Isaiah says God says to do, and it's these few simple things. Seek justice. It doesn't say for anybody in particular - for *everyone!* Rescue the oppressed. It doesn't say, "*Your pontoon boat may not pull in here.*" Defend the orphan - a costly enterprise.

I encountered a woman from Haiti the other night in Moscow at an art show in the basement of the Methodist Church. There was some stuff from the Moscow Clayworks there. The woman who was selling these things was from Haiti but she'd also lived in Madrid. We had an extraordinary conversation. It was many, many years ago that James and I visited Haiti. It's not a place you can have a vacation because poverty is so terrible and so in your face you can't forget it. I remember explaining to her that we stayed in a hotel. We had a full swimming pool. We were the only two people in the hotel. Full swimming pool, clean water. And I'm not exaggerating, kids this size were carrying tins as big as themselves on their heads because somebody at the top of the hill would allow them to take clean water home from their well or spring.

I asked her about the condition of the Episcopal Cathedral in Port au Prince which was destroyed in an earthquake. We talked about the extraordinary murals that were there, some of which have been saved a little bit. Behind that cathedral I remember seeing with James a bundle this big on the sidewalk wrapped in swaddling clothes. It was an infant waiting to be picked up by somebody. This is our world today. I couldn't worship by picking that child up. I hope somebody did.

And so we gather to receive instruction, to have it out with God today, to listen to the tough stuff that encourages us to believe that *even though our sins are as scarlet, they shall be like snow.* In other words, what's past is past. *Though they are like crimson, they shall become like wool.* In other words, do not be tied down by any guilt from the past. If this means something to you now, get going. *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.*

It's no secret. Gandhi said it, Martin Luther King, Jr. said it, Jesus said it: Violence breeds violence. These are simple, ancient pre-Christian truths. And so it was when we thought about these things after the eight o'clock mass, Neil Tufano came to me - they were here with the whole family today - and said, "*You know, what you talked about today reminded me of two things. Do you remember Noni's funeral?*" Noni was Jen's grandmother who attended their wedding here, and before the next Sunday Noni died. Noni was a member of a Polish Catholic Church in Dickson City, and I attended her funeral. During that funeral mass as people were coming to receive, I did not go because I know I'm not welcome in Roman churches, but I was kneeling, I was there, and glad to be there.

The priest with the paten in his hand all of a sudden started to bawl, "*Stop her! Get that woman! Stop her! Stop her!*" He left the altar with the bread in his hand, came down the aisle, found this young woman who I later learned was fourteen years old, bent over her and bawled her out for not eating her communion at the altar, while people were waiting to receive and then returned.

Now I'm not pointing fingers at Roman Catholics. Let's get this straight. I'm pointing fingers at Christian behaviors. We've all done this sometime. Neil said, "*That's what the lessons and the sermon reminded me of today.*" And then he said, "*The other thing it reminded me of was - Do you remember when Izzy was sick and we had an affair down at the pavilion to raise money?*" People understand the difference between worship and that which isn't. We are understood by what we do and how we do it and how we respect each other and the rest of the world. It has nothing to do with the liturgical rubrics whatsoever.

Now I think the liturgy is very useful. It gets us here once a week to listen to God's word and when the priest doesn't do a very good job and the sermon is rotten and all the rest of it, we're never left without something to eat. And so we run the risk of having God enter us through our ears and through our mouths and our guts, and we come here every week to be transformed, to be made into different people who worship God in a significant and different way from obeying liturgical rules, to obeying the rules of courtesy, to obeying the rules of concern, to

obeying the rules of sympathy, to obeying the rules of empathy, to obeying the rules of caring for those in need and sharing the excesses which are ours, and seeking justice, and investing in God's creation in fashions that we have been invested in ourselves. And that is what becomes our worship. People do see what you do, and it makes them fold up their speeches and put them in their pockets and share with us from the heart.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.