

PREPARING FOR THE DAY Sermon for November 27

By Rev. Dr. Donald Algeo

Isaiah 2:1-5 •

Psalm 122 •

Romans 13:11-14 •

Matthew 24:36-44

We don't do it as much anymore, but when we have incorporated a children's sermon into the Sunday Service, it has always been Jim or Sheryl's responsibility. The reason for that is that I've made it clear to the two of them that the only children's sermon they would get out of me would be the following: Thus saith the Lord: Children should be seen and not heard. Let us pray.

But despite that, this morning I have decided to start this message with something that might be called a children's sermon of sorts. I'm going to read it to you now. It's called: The Three Little Pigs.

Once upon a time there were three little pigs. One pig built a house of straw while the second pig built his house with sticks. They built their houses very quickly and then sang and danced all day because they were lazy. The third little pig worked hard all day and built his house with bricks.

A big bad wolf saw the two little pigs while they danced and played and thought, "What juicy tender meals they will make!" He chased the two pigs and they ran and hid in their houses. The big bad wolf went to the first house and huffed and puffed and blew the house down in minutes. The frightened little pig ran to the second pig's house that was made of sticks. The big bad wolf now came to this house and huffed and puffed and blew the house down in hardly any time. Now, the two little pigs were terrified and ran to the third pig's house that was made of bricks. The big bad wolf tried to huff and puff and blow the house down, but he could not. He kept trying for hours but the house was very strong and the little pigs were safe

inside. He tried to enter through the chimney but the third little pig boiled a big pot of water and kept it below the chimney. The wolf fell into it and died.

The two little pigs now felt sorry for having been so lazy. They too built their houses with bricks and lived happily ever after.

Now if we could just keep that story in mind while we take a look at our Gospel passage for this morning, we'll come back to it later.

Our passage occurs towards the end of the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew. This chapter is sometimes referred to as the 'apocalyptic' chapter of Matthew, because in it Matthew has gathered together various things Christ said, probably on several different occasions, and presented them in a form that would have been familiar to his largely Jewish audience, because many other writers during this time were putting their thoughts into this same form. All such writings came to be called 'apocalyptic', and they all share something in common. They were all basically predictions that the near future holds a period of time in which there will be a series of cataclysmic occurrences that will bring to an end the present evil age and clear the playing field for a new and better age to come.

If you read Chapter 24 you will see that this is exactly what's going on there, where a series of terrible signs and events will accompany what Christ calls 'the coming of the Son of Man,' events that will prove disastrous for some but not for all. With that in mind, let's read our passage from this morning, vv. 36-44, which we find near the end of the apocalyptic vision of Chapter 24.

Read: Matthew 24: 36-44.

Traditionally many have interpreted this passage, and in fact the entirety of Chapter 24, from the general point of view which has it - to put it most briefly and crudely - that there is a heaven and there is a hell, a place of eternal bliss and a place of eternal torment, and Christ lived and died to provide us access into the former and escape from the latter.

So in our passage, according to this interpretation, Christ is informing his followers that there will be no warning given before the end comes crashing in. And he gives an illustration from the Old Testament, that of Noah and the flood, to make his point. While Noah and his sons were busy building the ark, the rest of the world were eating and drinking and getting married - just leading their day to day lives - when the rains began and they were all drowned. And so Jesus is - again -

according to this traditional interpretation, warning how those who have not repented and given their lives to Christ will be eternally swept away, while those who have done so will be saved.

Or to put this in another way, those who approach the New Testament from a framework of heaven and hell and judgment separating the saved from the damned, will find in this passage as in many others in the Gospels, Our Lord providing information about the final, terrible, time or Day of Judgment.

But that is not the framework we bring to the New Testament and its Good News in this church. We do not believe or preach the everlasting separation of one part of humanity from another, the one to eternal bliss and the other to eternal torment. On the contrary, we preach the universal reconciliation of all to God through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. And so here in this passage, as everywhere else in the Bible, our framework allows us to think much more deeply about the message Christ brought, about the meaning of his stories and illustrations. What is the real nature of the separation Christ is concerned with, when he tells us that one will be taken and another will be left behind? If he's not predicting an actual future for actual people, what is he doing?

Which brings me back to the three little pigs. Why do we read this story to children? Are we telling them about three actual little pigs who built houses, and an actual big bad wolf who tried to blow the houses down? Are we just recounting facts to them, the way we might tell them what we did at work today? Of course not. We're telling them a story to communicate to them a moral. In this case, the moral is the importance and value of self-discipline and prudent planning and delayed gratification. Hearing stories like this, especially from adults the children love and respect, is in fact one of the important ways that children actually acquire those very character traits.

So also, here and everywhere in the Gospel records, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that Jesus is telling stories, not recounting facts, not past facts, not present facts, and not future facts. The insistence on reading the words of Christ as reports rather than as teaching and instruction has been the source, I think, of more error in Christian thought and Christian living than perhaps anything else.

As we've emphasized many times before, Christ came to teach us, not what some distant future will be like, not what will someday replace our world. He came to

begin the process of transforming our fallen world into one in which God Himself might comfortably dwell.

In the verses immediately preceding our passage for this morning, Our Lord tells us about a fig tree, and the lesson it can teach us. "When its branches become green and tender," he says, "and it starts putting out leaves, you know the summer is near." In context, the point he's making is clear. The point is that in the spiritual life, as in the life of nature, things occur in a process, one development lays the foundation for the next.

In the verses immediately following our passage, Christ contrasts a faithful servant with a foolish servant. The wise and faithful servant maintains an orderly house so that when the master returns there is no need to panic. The foolish, bad servant has neglected his responsibilities, so that when the master shows up at the door, there is no time to put the house in order. The point is not to distinguish between those who are going to heaven and those who are going to hell. The point is to show us something about the heavenly way of life, to show us that it is steady, faithful to spiritual trust and obedience.

And that's exactly the same point Jesus is making when he draws upon the analogy of Noah and his ark, and when he speaks of a separation between people.

The problem for the people in the story of Noah is that it takes time to build a boat, just like it takes time for a good little pig to build a solid little house. When Jesus talks about a day when people will be separated, he's not talking about an actual day when this will happen, anymore than there is an actual wolf who will on a certain day start huffing and puffing and blowing houses down. He's talking about how the spiritual life - the heavenly life - is built up: how it's built up steadily, evenly, and on a firm foundation. A life so constructed, like a house built on a rock, will be able to weather whatever the world throws at it.

We're all familiar with the old saying: Crises don't build character, they reveal it. I think that could be an appropriate motto for the Christian spiritual life. Character is created over time, piece by piece, in the multitude of small moments, small challenges, small choices, small opportunities that occupy all the waking hours of all our days. The tendencies and capacities that grow out of those small character-building bricks are what will sustain us - or fail us - when we are called upon to weather a storm.

What Christ is teaching us in this morning's passage is not the urgency to make some choice between heaven and hell - there is no hell, so there is no such choice. What Christ **is** teaching is that the practices and rules of Christian living and conversation and prayer and thanksgiving and thought are meant to apply to our ordinary, everyday lives and everything - literally everything - they contain, because only then are we prepared to respond in the heavenly way to the spiritual crises of disease and despair and doubt and fear that we will all most certainly experience as we grow in wisdom and strength and oneness with God.

And so our prayer for this morning and for this message, Lord God Almighty, is that you open our eyes to the everyday, our ears to the commonplace, and our hearts to the run-of-the-mill. We ask that you keep us in constant awareness of the endless opportunity each day presents us to manifest your endless grace in small secret ways apparent only to you. We pray that through steady and constant adherence, the relationship between our will and your own might transform from obedience to love, and that we might thereby become joint heirs in your kingdom with your son and our Savior, in whose name we pray.