

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 8 August 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

As expressed in today's collect, we have an overwhelming desire to live according to God's will, to live the life we were created for. As we confess in that same collect, we find this hard, impossible in fact, to do without divine help. And so we pray, asking that God will guide our minds, hearts, and actions so that we can follow God's way.

What do today's readings tell us about the will of God, the way of God that we are striving to follow?

From this early section of Isaiah's prophecy, we see that it has nothing to do with proper ceremonies and worship. Instead, it has to do with our daily lives. It is seeking justice, in particular caring for the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan – that is, the weakest and most defenseless in society.

Psalm 50 repeats the assertion that proper worship is not the problem. Both of these readings make clear that abundant, glorious, precise worship, worthy as it may be in itself, is nothing but an aggravation to God, when it is in the context of a daily life of selfishness and unconcern for others.

In Hebrews the emphasis is on faith, specifically stepping out in faith on the path God lays before us, even if we will never live to see the promises fulfilled. The Way of God is the Way of Abraham, who left everything he knew and followed God into an unfamiliar and turbulent new life, who remained faithful even though things were often very difficult and not what he expected.

In the Gospel, Jesus reminds us not to worry, not to trust in, or fret about, material possessions, but to trust in God. The way of God's Kingdom is the way of faith and hope and trust. He also reminds us that we are to live our lives as if God may burst in at any moment, recalling last week's story about the man building ever bigger barns, thinking he is set for years of ease, only to die that night.

I thought about what all this means for us, here today in Tigard. What does it say about our worship? What does it say about our life as a parish community, as families, as individuals?

First, worship. Today's lines from Isaiah and Psalm 50 are typical of many instances in the Old Testament where God is chastising the priests and leaders of Israel for engaging in complex and beautiful rituals, while living lives of greed and exploitation. Sometimes the lines are taken out of context (lines like, "I hate your incense") to mean that God does not like ritual, that God does not care about all the careful rules for liturgy set down in the books of Moses. But there is no evidence for that. In each case what is said is that a relationship with God rests on our relationship with other

people, on our way of organizing our daily lives. And if those daily lives are built on the suffering of others, no amount of elegant worship will make the relationship with God whole.

We, too, have many established patterns of worship, our Anglican way of doing things, passed on from generation to generation, filled with beauty and meaning and connection. Those things are all pleasing to God insofar as they open us up to God's spirit, insofar as they build community, insofar as they encourage our hearts and minds to be more like God's. We can say that we have warrant for our concern that everything be done decently and in order.

But never at the cost of harming people. Is it important to have everything polished beautifully, and ironed crisply, and organized precisely? Yes, if it aids people in their connecting to God and one another. If someone fails to do things exactly 'the way we are supposed to', does that mean the person should be scolded or excluded or shamed? No. How we treat people is more important to God than following the rules of decorum. This can be tricky for those of us who have always been Anglicans – or who have joined the Episcopal Church precisely because we love the orderliness and beauty of our ritual. Loving it is fine, as long as it does not license us to be unloving toward those around us, and that it cannot make up for other shortcomings.

So these lessons do not commit us one way or another on the subject of elaborate ritual and beautiful ceremony. It can be part of the Way of God or not. What they do tell us is that they must never get in the way of our concern for people around us, or encourage us to feel some sort of superiority.

So the meaningfulness of what we do when we gather for prayer and sacraments depends on what we do the rest of the time. This is our year of hospitality. So we can begin there, asking ourselves whether we are living up to Abraham's standard of enthusiastic hospitality, making people feel welcome wherever we are. The Way of God includes that sort of all-embracing welcome, not merely welcoming people to Saint James, but welcoming them to our neighborhood, welcoming them to our place of work, welcoming them into the flow of traffic on the freeway.

In terms of what Isaiah is saying, the Way of God means always caring about fairness, means noticing whether people are treated equitably in my workplace, my city, my country, the world. This consistent concern should affect not only how I treat people myself, but also all kinds of decisions in my life. We will never all agree in how we vote, but everyone of our votes should be informed by our sense of justice, and responsibility for those in most need. Following the Way of God means always considering the effects of what I do on others, so it means thinking about the clothes and food I buy, my driving habits, my energy usage, everything.

Hebrews reminds us to be daring and trusting as we seek to be followers of God. After hearing a lecture on the environmental impact of everything we do, it can be easy to give up in discouragement, to shut ourselves off because it seems too much for us to cope with, because we feel too small to have any real impact. Then we remember Abraham: listen to the call and step out in faith. Be brave. It is God calling. Wherever we hear that call, whether it is to help things be fairer at work, or to help a struggling person to find a home or a job, or to make our lives more eco-friendly, this Way of God involves answering the call and doing our best, knowing that we may not reach our goal, that we may never see the results of our efforts, but that God will always be with us.

Jesus, too, reminds us not to fret. We are not expected to do everything ourselves, or to take care of all the needs we see. But we are called to respond, to bring our best.

The most important thing I find in the Gospel reading today is that sense of living each moment as the one on which our relationship with God can be judged. I do not mean that at all in a fearful, 'God is hiding behind the next bush', kind of way. Rather, this is the day, the very moment in which I am living with God. This next step is a step on the Way of God. It is all right now, right here, whether in worship, or in the grocery store, or in an office, or on the road, or at home. Jesus tells us that God has the future well in hand, we are responsible for the present.

I am always looking to the future, setting things aside, planning, organizing for some future situation. Prudence is a virtue. There is nothing wrong with being careful about how we manage our money and property. But taking care of my own desires now with the thought that I will look after the people around me later, after I have all my own ducks in a row, is absolutely against what Jesus is saying.

Now is the time. That person next to me is the one I can help, listen to, welcome, whatever.

It is a challenging way to live, partly because it is so focused on caring for everyone else and partly because it involves a kind of boundless trust that whatever the future holds, it is in God's good hands.

I was reminded of a saying that a friend used to quote often, "Never put off till tomorrow the good you can do today."

This is the day, the day to worship and rejoice, the day to welcome and embrace, the day to put our whole heart's treasure into God's loving kingdom.