

Choose Life

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 2019

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Sermon text: I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before your life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.

I bought this black pottery rosary and cross from a small shop in San Bartola, a village outside of Oaxaca Mexico famous for its tradition of black pottery. I was there on the day of its patronal fiesta—so I followed a band and St Bartholomew’s statue around the streets and into the plaza of the small village. The people prepared baskets of flowers and tables of food—it was clearly going to go on for a while, though I left after about an hour. One had the sense that everyone (except for me) knew each other, had done this before, and were putting up with the speeches while waiting for the meal.

Church in other words.

Church—religion and ritual—is a means to situate the people within what Peter Berger once called the sacred canopy, an integrated world in which the human, divine and natural spheres interweave, where people have sense of their place in the cosmos and the community, where the generations share an ongoing development of life and culture with a sense of continuity and personal inclusion.

Here’s a sun and a sunflower in the center of a cross: Jesus as son and sun, as life and new life. It’s an object and an image/idea of great beauty. But does it still have power?

It is commonplace for sociologists to observe that modernity has corroded the sacred canopy, left it in patches of humanism and superstition and self-help therapy—just as the Amazon forest is being cut down and burned. Natural forests have been replaced with land used for commodity production, often exploited and then abandoned, the loss of the intricate web irreplaceable—and perhaps the same can be said of the web of meaning and purpose religion has traditionally provided.

Perhaps what is happening to the physical canopy of the rainforest, the loss of species diversity, the deteriorating health of our planet has a cultural analogy in the loss of transcendent meaning, life purpose, and community cohesion in the human community.

Oh I know; we say *namaste* to each other after yoga practice: the divine in me salutes the divine in you. But we seem to have lost the divine *without*, the overarching sense of transcendence that gives such a statement more than a self-centered referent. Of course each soul each person is sacred, an image of the divine, a splinter of God. But how are we related to the whole? What sense do you have of God's transcendent and immanent reality, and consequently to the natural world as also sacred, to a community that understands itself as situated within a continuum of time, a flow of generations, each responsible for the next and grateful to the previous? We live as if each generation, given a different letter or epithet—builder, boomer, slacker, gen x, y, z—were somehow springing newly formed like Athena from the forehead of the zeitgeist.

We are busy making brands of our selves, instead of growing, unfolding, maturing, working, teaching dying within a rich ecosystem of meaning and purpose—hedged by mystery, with intimations of immortality.

Not that we are utterly bereft of community, meaning, purpose and God. Yesterday was Community Day, a sort of patronal fiesta of the village of Millbrook. A day of soccer tryouts, farmer's market, Baptist Church fried chicken, the beagle parade—highlighting aspects of our small town American community— I love it.

Grace was in the mix—we had our three tables, inviting people to this service, kids to our youth group, seniors to the new Millbrook at Home program.

It was good to see a vibrant community day. But is this enough? Does what the sociologist Robert Bellah called “the American civil religion” provide a genuine sacred canopy? Or has our civil canopy grown thin and frayed?

Well, if polls and reports are any indication, people are feeling more isolated, and politics has grown more polarized. There is growing inequality and other measures that indicate the American dream is a nightmare for many and something to be walled around and defended by others. Instead of an optimistic attitude toward the future, there is an increasing number of “deaths of despair” (drug overdose, suicide, alcohol abuse) among the young. All of this suggests a society suffering a meaning deficit, a loss of purpose and optimism and direction, a gently dehumanizing drift. The Times’ Ross Douthut, channeling Marianne Williamson, writes: “There’s a spiritual void in America, a loss of meaning and metaphysical horizon. The problem is cultural, spiritual, holistic; the solution has to be all three as well.”

We need a bigger picture. We need a new canopy of meaning and purpose.

I climbed a small mountain overlooking Lagrange later Saturday afternoon with Zoe. I could see some fields and buildings—but mostly a green canopy—a reminder we live in a temperate rain forest in the northeast. The clouds were waffled lightly across the sky.

Can you picture it? Now join me in a mental trip through the atmosphere. It won’t take long. In fact, the atmosphere is surprisingly thin. Most of the action—clouds, moisture, gusts of wind—takes place in a five or six mile thick band, the troposphere. Beyond that is the stratosphere, the 30,000 foot plus range where the jets fly and the jet stream flows, where the air is thin, little oxygen. And on up we go to the Karman line, an imaginary line about 62 miles up where the atmosphere meets outer space—the edge of earth. If you drove a car straight up at highway speed it would only take an hour. That’s it, the narrow band that swaddles the earth and keeps us alive.

Look down in your mind’s eye—the God’s eye view. And here I begin to quote: “And God saw that it was good’ (Gen 1:25). God’s gaze, at the beginning of the Bible, rests lovingly on his creation. From habitable land to life-giving waters, from fruit-bearing trees to animals that share our common home, everything is dear in the eyes of God, who offers creation to men and women as a precious gift to be preserved.”

This is from a pastoral letter from Pope Francis on September 1, the world day of prayer for the care of creation, the beginning of an ecumenical season known as Creation Season, from September 1 through October 4, the feast of St Francis. It is a good time to reflect on this great gift of life—this island of life, this blue-green pearl floating in the immensity of space, holding within its narrow atmosphere all the life we have known in the universe to date.

Is life an anomaly in the cosmos? Or is the emergence of life and consciousness an example of the purpose of creation? You have a choice; the answer is not given by evidence alone. But so far we seem to be a unique outpost of life. By chance or purpose here we are, on a rocky planet blessed with water and air, orbiting at a just-right distance from a medium sized sun, neither too hot for life-water vaporized, gases toxic, or too cold, water frozen, no chance for evolution. Here we are, on this blessed blue and white pearl, teeming with green life. Here we are on what we will later describe in our eucharistic (thanksgiving) liturgy as “this fragile earth, our island home.”

God saw that it was good and blessed it. We were given the gift of life and the care of creation. But as the Pope puts it: “Tragically, the human response to this gift has been marked by sin, selfishness and a greedy desire to possess and exploit. Egoism and self-interest have turned creation, a place of encounter and sharing, into an arena of competition and conflict. In this way, the environment itself is endangered: something *good* in God’s eyes has become something to be *exploited* in human hands. ... We have caused a climate emergency that gravely threatens nature and life itself, including our own.”

My beloved friends, as we begin a new program year in the church, as we enter fall and school and the rhythms of our cultural seasons, let us be mindful of the rhythms of earth and the plan and plea of God. Choose life.

In the beginning God blessed us. Prophets and sages have told us to use our gifts for the common good. God told Moses to lay before the Israelites both promises and warnings, the blessings of life lived in harmony with God, each other and the natural world, and the curses that will come if we live for ourselves alone. It was up to them to choose; it is up to us now. Choose life, Moses pleaded. Choose life.

In the name of Christ, Amen.
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook NY

Golden Calf

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2019

Readings: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Sermon text: They have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped and sacrificed to it.

Who doesn't love a party? Not the Israelites. They couldn't wait for Moses to come down the holy mountain with the new commandments of God before they began an idolators' ball. They couldn't wait a little longer for more news from the One God whose sacred name YHWH had been revealed to them through Moses. The very people who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt by the power of this God, who had passed miraculously through the Red Sea and been brought to the foot of the holy mountain, who witnessed the awesome thunder of the voice of God calling the people to attention, silence and worship. They couldn't wait.

They couldn't wait even though God's message to them was basically, "Wait here while I talk to Moses." They were happy to send Moses, for they could not bear it when the voice of God thundered the first Ten Commandments to all of them assembled at the base. They heard only frightening thunder and terrifying lightning and smoke from the mountain. "You go, Moses," they pleaded. "You go and get the Word of God for us. We'll wait down here. Your brother Aaron will look after us."

Here's what happened next, according to Exodus 32:1-7, the text immediately preceding the passage we heard in our first lesson (Ex. 32:7-14):

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons,

and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.”

Party time.

God wasn't pleased. Not that God doesn't like a good party. I think Jesus decisively demonstrated that God does like a party when he turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2).

But not a party dedicated to the golden calf.

What is the golden calf? Scholars might point to Egyptian, Canaanite and Mesopotamian fertility gods and goddesses for parallels. A bull calf—symbol of youth and power—or female calf, sign of spring and fertility.

And it was made of gold. Gold melted from the jewelry of the Israelites—which, if you remember, they had obtained as a sort of ransom from the Egyptians during the plagues (Exodus 12:35-36).

Wealth. Beauty, Creativity. Power. These are perennial idols, are they not? We don't need an archeologist to find evidence for their attraction today.

And they are true goods, true blessings. God is the source of all blessings: abundance, beauty, life and light. But blessings become cursed when they are made into idols. When they are worshipped and served and sacrificed for, instead of the One who is the Creator, the Power and the Glory, the only God deserving our worship and heart obedience.

My friends, we are idolators, every last one of us. We are dancers at the idolators' ball. I admit it, I confess it, I own it, but I want to change my ways and become a true monotheist. And I would like you to consider joining me.

Because the party is over. We have ransacked our mother earth for her gold and silver and diamonds and rare metals and sand and salt and every resource we can extract and exploit. We have sacrificed our people, even our children, to get it. We have fought wars and lost friends from greed and envy. We have created an ecological catastrophe that even now is upon us in its first stages. If we do not heed the thunderous warnings from science and nature and prophets and peasants—if we carry on as if the party will last forever—we are doomed. We don't even need the wrath of God. We will reap the whirlwind whose seeds we have sown ourselves.

In fact, it is not God whom we should fear—though I think God must be at the very least disappointed in this experiment of reason and free will now careening into self and species extinction. But God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6 and elsewhere—this epithetical description repeated many times in scripture).

Moses was able to reason with the justifiably angry deity who saw what had happened down at the foot of the mountain (what, I deliver you from Egypt, part the sea, miraculously feed you and you can't wait a few days while I give you ten commandments?). Moses managed to appeal to God's mercy and God's reputation (people will say you brought us into the desert to kill us). But the damage had already been done; consequences followed. Civil war and plagues were a natural consequence of ignoring God's commandments then. They will be the consequence once again if we do not change our ways now.

There will be consequence even if we change our ways now. We have already changed the earth's climate, the ocean's acidity, the glaciers' longevity and now the ocean is rising and the temperature is going to keep going up even if we were suddenly to all agree and act on the Paris Accord and the Green New Deal. We—and even more our children and children's children—are going to have to adapt to a new world. But there is better and worse. There is turning back to God and a vision of our mission on earth given in the very first chapters of the Bible: to keep and till, to care for and defend this Garden of Earth (Genesis 2:15).

We have been given dominion, mastery, but not to exploit and abuse. We have been given blessings beyond all deserving—nut not to turn them into idols to be worshipped and for which others and even our future children are sacrificed.

The earth is itself not a god to be worshipped. The earth is our home to defend and pass on. We are a part of God's plan for life in the cosmos, for the emergence of mind and purpose in a universe that is mostly space and scattered galaxies of stars and planets. We are a sacred outpost, not to be thought of as disposable, exploitable, only for us. We are, potentially, seeds of an infinite future.

We have even been sent the Son of God, the incarnate Word, to show us by teaching and example the life-giving way of love and sacrifice, forgiveness and healing. Can we not follow his Way to a better and more sustainable, regenerative—resurrection—world? Can we not treasure the very soil of our planet as the sign and substance of life reemerging from death, just as leaves turn sunlight into sugar? Are these everyday miracles not greater treasures than gold, more beautiful than the brightest jewel, wonders of creativity worthy of the highest praise? Yet they are humble, as plentiful as grass that feeds the herbivores, as the sunlight that spreads energy and life throughout the ecosystem, in such amazing diversity of species, adapted most cunningly to the climate and place.

That is better. What is worse is the continuing pursuit—even when we know it is fatal—of the golden calf. The idols of money and power, beauty and fame, for which we sacrifice our lives and the common good. We must turn from these idols. We must step away from the party of endless growth, accumulation, exploitation and self-seeking.

As Moses put it before the Israelites, and as I put before you last week, God had shown you the way, and set before your blessings and curses, life and death. Choose life. Choose life.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
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A Pair of Sandals

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 22, 2019

Readings: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Sermon text: Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Amos 8:4-7

Amazon. What comes to mind? The empire of commerce, or the river and rainforest of South America?

John: what comes to my mind are the mythical women warriors in the ancient world known as Amazons. Thanks, John. It may well be that the future of our planet depends on women warriors, not mythical ones but real, not long ago but now.

I raise the word Amazon because it obviously brings to mind both one of the great success stories of internet-platform globalized capitalism and the great watershed home of many of the world's living species and the billions of trees that are often called the lungs of the world.

And the warrior women.

And therein lies the challenge of our day. We too often prefer convenience and low cost to what Jewish tradition calls *tikkun olam*—the healing of the world, the work that has been given us to do by God as co-creators and stewards of this planet earth.

You know what's happening. Scientists have warned for years about climate change driven by carbon emissions leading to global warming. The effects are now so familiar as to need no repeating: rising sea levels from polar ice melts that threaten coasts and islands, but increasing fresh water scarcity and weather pattern disruption in heavily populated areas. Heat—we are up one degree celsius from preindustrial levels with a rise of 3 degree or more by

end of century—which may be averted by reduction of emissions agreed to in the Paris Accord. But that accord is not being met—not by the US or Brazil or many other countries. And this is a world problem—all have to join in reducing carbon emissions, resisting habitat loss, stopping deforestation, and getting serious about changing patterns of food production and convenience and low cost consumer driven goods.

The siren song of *convenience and low cost*. I hear it; I am part of the problem. I sometimes click on Amazon instead of going to the local book store—and watch the local small business economy disappear. Save on meat and imported vegetables—but at the cost of supporting an industrial farm economy that is killing the soil and polluting the waters and brutally treating animals.

Buy clothing that hasn't really risen in cost despite years of cost of living increases. How is that possible? Automated production, increased efficiency. Yes, but also outsourcing to low cost labor around the world, including child labor. Sweat shops in other words. Wages that keep people alive but not housed or decently clothed and fed and educated.

But at least we get peak TV.

The prophet Amos cries out against the injustice of his time. The rich were living high but the poor were desperate. Parents sold their children because they couldn't feed them. The poor are being sold for a pair of sandals, he cried. This is wrong, unjust, contrary to the will of God.

The will of God is no mystery on this score. It was revealed through the Law and Prophets: the land itself had rights, a sabbath allowance to rest and regenerate. The fields could not be clean cut—the corners had to be left for gleaning. God would judge Israel not on gross domestic product or countries it conquered but on its treatment of widows and orphans—the poor and unconnected.

And on that score, the prophet said, Israel is failing. And all its prosperity will not avert its doom if God withdraws God's blessing and protection.

Do we not understand ourselves to be in the same position? God has blessed this country, this earth with such bounty. But we have recklessly filled it with people, exploiting every resource, heedless of the future or of balanced and sustainable and just patterns of living. It is time—past time—to get back to the garden, to care for and protect this earth as God gave us the mission in Genesis 2.

Or face a bleak future. And who, exactly, will bear that cost? The children. They are the poor we are selling for a pair of sandals—for we leaving an impoverished legacy if we do not change our ways.

And the children are rightly mad about it. I joined in the climate strike march this Friday down in NYC. Millions marched all over the world. Inspired by a young girl from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, and hundreds and thousands of other young leaders. They carried homemade signs and chanted old organizing slogans adapted for the day: “What do want?” **Climate justice!** “When do we want it?” **Now.** I was part of a small group of ecumenical clergy carrying a banner made by the ACT organization of the world Council of Churches. We chanted and sang and carried signs. It was a beautiful day and great fun to walk alongside all the young people.

But the point was deadly serious. It really is their future. When I hear talk about the need to have zero carbon emissions by the year 2050—some thirty years from now—I make a mental calculation and think, nope, I probably won’t be there. But thirty years from now many of those school children will be working-parent age. Will they have children or will they say, as some said on an NPR segment this week, I wouldn’t bring kids into the world that is coming.

The scientists tell us that change later is too late—we must take these next ten or so years to really turn the ship around. It is a big ship, this Titanic of global commerce and vast population of humanity. It is still growing, especially in some parts of the world, and peak human population is projected by 2040 to be 11 billion or so. Humanity has more than doubled in my lifetime. That is the driving force—people trying to live.

But we can live better. “Live the life that really is life,” writes Paul in 2 Timothy. “Choose life,” pleaded Moses. Sustainable, equitable, shared-with-other-species life. We can do it. There is land and resources—used wisely. We have made great strides in renewable energy—they are cheaper now than fossil fuels. Let’s actually keep the fossil fuel in the ground and let the sun and the wind power us—we can engineer the technological change if we have the political will.

And where will we get the will to grit our teeth, spend our dollars on fairly traded and equitably made goods, to live more lightly on the earth, more simply, with less air travel, more mass transit—all of the little things that add up? It won’t be easy. It will take hundreds and thousands of little steps as well as big policy changes. But it can be done, with God’s help and our hands.

And it must be done. Because the children demand it. Because justice demands it. Because we cannot face God having lived on this earth in relative ease and luxury compared to a world our grandchildren will inherit if we have not done what we can to pass on a decent legacy. Because their voices cry from the future—do not sell us for a pair of sandals.

Rather, plant a tree. One of the simplest and most effective ways to take carbon out of the atmosphere. Instead of deforestation and conversion of the Amazon to grazing land—allow it to remain the great mother, the lungs and heart of biodiversity. Plant trees—billions, even trillions, in Africa and elsewhere. The churches in Ethiopia and Tanzania are leading the way.

And follow the lead of these children, these young women warriors. Let these young amazons save the world with our help—by the grace of God.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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