

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Follow the Guide”
Rev. Joanne Blair
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Exodus 25:1-9; Matthew 25:31-46

Many of us remember the days before cell phones and GPS, and yes, even before computers. Back then, we used maps that were actually made of paper, and spread them out and charted our course when going from one place to another.

Really, I was pretty good (highlighter in hand) with marking the expressways and exits for the main part of the trip, and off I would go. But I usually got baffled the closer I got to my destination. Once off the expressways, I would consistently get all turned around while navigating the details of that last leg of the trip.

I would often have to stop and ask someone how to get to where I was going, and invariably I would be totally confused once I tried to put their directions into action. Was that the 3rd road on the left after the tire sign? Or was the tire sign on the left? Or if I reached the tire sign had I gone too far? And what tire sign? I don't even see one!

And so I would stop and ask someone else, who would tell me that I was going in the wrong direction, and I would leave more confused and frustrated, and lost, than ever.

Remembering that now, it makes that current-day familiar and irritating voice that says, “recalculating” sound like a love song. And what a victory when that same voice finally says, “You have reached your destination!”

In today's reading from Exodus, the Hebrews are still wandering and in need of trusting that God is, in fact, still with them and guiding them.

The instructions for the “portable temple” assure the people that God is mobile, and more importantly, willing to be present right in the very midst of them.

Verse 3 that Kelly/Swid read for us today gives a list of items needed, but I want to draw our attention to the first words of the verse: “This is the offering that you shall receive from them...” The key word is “offering”-- the materials to be used are to be freely offered. There is no intimidation or requirement placed on the people. These offerings are to be given by people who genuinely want to be in communion with God.

Which is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's reading from Matthew. As the image of Jesus shifts from shepherd to king, we are reminded that no power can match the power of the reigning Lord. Today, in fact, is known as “Christ the King, or Reign of Christ” Sunday.

And as our Lord speaks of separating the sheep and the goats, the thought of a judgement makes us fearful... yet the answer seems obvious: we will feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. Check. Got it covered. We are sheep! But it's not as simple as that. It seldom is.

Oh, doing these things does matter. It matters very much! But if we stop there we have missed the nugget of the story. Both the sheep and the goats express surprise, and question... when had they seen the Lord? The difference between the sheep and the goats is intention.

The sheep served others because there was a need that they could help fulfill. They were unaware of the Lord's presence and had no expectation of earning "brownie points." In fact, they had no expectation of any reward. They acted out of caring love, freely given.

The goats' question leads us to believe that if they had known the king was among those in need, they surely would have stepped in and helped. The goats were not godless or unethical, they bore no malice- but they are deemed unrighteous because they are motivated by self-interest. Had they thought the Son of Man was in the midst, they would have been happy to serve, and thus gain eternal reward.

To be honest, I think most of us fall somewhere in the middle between sheep and goats. I believe I do. On one hand, I consider myself a compassionate person, and to have a genuine concern for those who are hurting, or have suffered an injustice. I truly hope I am.

On the other hand, I can be a bit self-centered. I like to joke and say that "it's all about me" ... but maybe I'm not always joking. I knew of someone who called those of us that fall in the middle between goats and sheep, "geeps." Should we "geeps" live in fear, that we will be lumped in with the goats?

No, for this passage is not meant to incite fear. So often this scripture is portrayed as frightening and condemning, but the text is actually meant to bring us to right thinking and right action for the right reasons. It serves to inspire and empower us. It really is good news! It calls on each one of us to share those gifts which we have and be a part of God's mission.

It guides us to remember that which we are called to do and be:

- To love God and love our neighbor
- To imitate the vision of Jesus and see others as God sees them
- To serve the "other" as though he or she were Christ himself

We all have something to offer.

And we are called to offer our gifts to go beyond the mere acts of feeding, clothing, sheltering, and visiting those in need.

As Jesus showed us, charity is not a substitute for kinship. We are called into relationship, even when that relationship is improbable. And Christ promises to be there, and guide us.

Just as God promised the Hebrews to “dwell among you” throughout their wandering and beyond, so God promises to be always with us. Jesus not only came to save... but to love, nurture, inspire, model and guide us. He still does.

God loves us no matter what. But it is only when we accept that love and let it transform us that we can begin to understand it.

Again, it is only when we accept that love and let it transform us that we can begin to understand it.

Today marks the end of a liturgical year. We have been on a journey the past 12 months as we have traveled through the Christian church year. We have followed the steps of Jesus as he was born, walked the hillsides, healed, taught, was crucified, and rose again.

We have celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit, and reflected on what it means to be disciples of Christ. Today is the last Sunday of that journey for this liturgical year. Next Sunday we enter Advent, and as we once again begin that journey to remind ourselves who we are, and whose we are.

Today's reading from Exodus speaks of a God who promises to be with the people and guide them.

Today's reading from Matthew promises the same thing. And it speaks of a future kingdom in which God will reign in Christ. But it is not a “final judgement” that we should be focusing on.

The Kingdom of God is a present reality in our lives, and God invites each and every one of us to be a part of it. The choice to accept or reject it rests with us.

Throughout it all, we have a guide. We don't need a paper map or a technological GPS. We have the best guide of all. Jesus. And all we have to do is trust and follow that guide. The guide may not take us on the most expeditious route, or the one with the prettiest scenery, but we will end up in a glorious destination. And our guide will never lead us astray.

And so the challenge for today is to ask ourselves: Where in my life do I need to “recalculate”, to ensure that I am following The One True Guide?