

Sermon Proper 28 A 2011

Judges 4:1-7

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25: 14-30

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Bill Watson

Caught up in the day to day activities of life, I sometimes find it difficult to get a grasp on the bigger picture. Perhaps you experience this as well. Mondays run into Fridays. And the weekends that we looked forward to with such a sense of anticipation, well, the weekends pass in the blink of an eye. Where was the relaxation and rejuvenation that we had hoped for? One week runs into another. Before long another year has passed. Where have our lives gone? Where is God in all this as well? Caught up in the day to day we may miss the bigger picture.

One perspective on the bigger picture is found in scripture. The Bible reveals the patterns of God's divine action over broad expanses of time.

Take our OT lesson from the Book of Judges. The lesson itself seems odd or perhaps out of place to us this Sunday as we consider the scope of this past church year's lessons. We began at the beginning of God's relationship with humanity from the book of Genesis. (who could forget hearing the creation story read at 8 by Jim Elson). The creation story led us into the patriarchal narratives beginning with Abraham and Sarah and continuing with Isaac and Rebecca to Jacob and Leah and Rachel to Joseph and the captivity in Egypt. The story continued through Moses and ended with Joshua as the Israelites entered the Promised Land. Today is the next to last Sunday in the church year; events are drawing to an end. To understand how the lesson from Judges fits in, we have to understand the bigger picture.

The Israelites have entered the land of promise. For about 200 years from their entry into the promised land in 1220 B.C until the reign of Saul in 1020 B.C. Israel was led by a series of judges. The recurring story was a familiar one, a story of infidelity on the part of the people of Israel. This brought about God's anger and punishment. This led to Israel's remorse which would lead to forgiveness by God and healing. It is a very familiar story indeed. So during this time the people were overseen by a series of judges. Deborah was one of a line of leaders who oversaw the beloved people of God. Deborah was both judge and prophetess, thus connecting her to the line of prophets before her. I love hearing the story of Deborah because it reminds us that Israel was not only led by men but powerful women as well. In fact, the victory that Deborah predicts in our reading will be accomplished when another woman, Jael kills the evil King Jabin. It is good to remember that men were not the only conduits of God's love, mercy and prophecy.

After the 200 year reign of judges the people begged God to be led instead by a king, just as the other nations on earth. Their request was deeply offensive, since God was their king, but the people clamored for an earthly king. God warned them that they would not be happy with the consequences but relented and gave them a king. This story is thus a connection between the patriarchs and matriarchs who preceded the judges and the era of kingship. That era began in 1020 B.C. with the anointing of King Saul. The line of kings continued from Saul to David and then to Solomon. This series of leaders created an opening for a divine king's arrival. When it is clear that kings are unable to call the people of God into faithful covenant obedience, God determines to do something new. As the prophet Isaiah expressed it, "behold I am about to do a new thing" as we hear at Christmas. That new thing was to send his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

This church year is rapidly coming to an end. We are concluding this first year of the three-year lectionary cycle, during which we have heard lessons primarily from Matthew's gospel. The story of Jesus' life and ministry as told through Matthew's lens is coming to an end. The series of stories that Jesus shares towards the end of his gospel relate to the coming kingdom of God or as Matthew ever the faithful Jew who is reluctant

to use the divine name refers to it, the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is teaching about this coming kingdom, this already and not yet phenomenon. Jesus has inaugurated this new creation in his coming and after his Ascension, we await his coming again. At the second coming, the New Jerusalem will descend from the clouds and heaven will be joined to earth in this new creation, the kingdom of God. That experience will be a time of judgment as our lesson suggests.

But the lesson has much more to reveal to us. It speaks of our relationship with God.

“It is as if...” The story that Jesus tells is an analogy. “It is as if...”

In today’s story the characters are just that. They are not to be interpreted as divine, they are human. But there is something in the interaction that is divine, that is the point of the story. In the parable of the talents a certain person is going away for a long time. A very wealthy person and he must leave his wealth in the care of others. A talent in the story was a very large sum of money. One talent was equivalent to 15 years of wages. The landowner knew his servants and gave to each according to his ability. Then the man went away for a long time. Upon his return the accounts were settled. The first two servants had gotten creative and active with what was given them and they doubled the amount. But the third servant was governed by fear and a theology of scarcity. All he could return was what he was given. What a disappointment. He had a great opportunity but his fear limited his response. The gift, the responsibility, the opportunity however you want to interpret it was wasted.

Brother Anthony de Mello, S.J. shares a story in his book, *The Heart of the Enlightened*. Page 2 from Synthesis, Proper 28.

The story reminds us that God has great hopes for our lives. Scripture was not written for a time long past; scripture speaks to us as well. How does this story speak to us today? So what are we to make of this?

Everything is a gift, our life, where we were born, our family of origin, our present family and living arrangements, our profession or vocation, all are God’s gift to us.

The story of scripture is the story of God’s great love affair with the people of God, with all of God’s creation. It is a story of how God is working his purpose out as year moves into year as the hymn says. God continues to work today as God has worked throughout time. God empowers us, gifts us, entrusts us. Each of us has been blessed with unique gifts and abilities. And God has hopes for each one of us.

What will we do with the riches of faith that have been entrusted to us? The poet Mary Oliver asks the question, “What will you do with your one wild life?”

During my three years studying at VTS, I met some incredible friends. I was particularly drawn to the students from Africa. One such student was Samwel, an Anglican priest from Tanzania who had come to VTS to study for an advanced degree. If these foreign students were successful the first year, they were invited to return for a second year of study.

Samwel was a gregarious priest. He was fluent in his native Tanzanian dialect as well as in the language of commerce in Tanzania, Swahili. But he struggled with the finer points of his third language, English. This caused him trouble with his studies. I spent some time trying to tutor Samwel in theology and his other studies. Samwel studied but he was a priest in the church and a minister of the gospel. He was called to share the gospel at all times and with all people. Study at times took a back seat.

Sunday mornings he served a parish in Burke, VA. Sunday afternoons found most students studying but not Samwel. Samwel had to share Christ’s love. He would walk from the seminary in Alexandria across the 14th Street Bridge into the District of Columbia to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the homeless and addicted, the down and out. He even had a hat that read “On Foot Ministries.”

Other students were so moved by his work that they bought him a used bicycle to make the several mile journey more easily. No matter the weather, Samwel was there.

At the end of the year, he had ministered to hundreds of people. He had prayed with them, he had evangelized them and shared the love of Jesus. Samwel was using every gift at his disposal to make a difference in the lives of people whom many would rather overlook. Alas, he had not done well in his studies though and the seminary was not impressed with his academic achievement. Consequently, Samwel was not invited to return for a second year of study. Yet, Samwel made a huge return on the gifts that had been entrusted to him and in turn he taught me a great deal about the love of God.

Over the broad expanse of history, God has been working his purpose out. God has revealed the divine nature to the world in Jesus. As we await his coming again we are not to be idle, instead we are to work and to will for God's good pleasure. We are to recognize our gifts and use them to bring in the Kingdom of God. Each of us has been gifted for the work that God holds before us, to share the love of Jesus with every fiber of our being. And in that sharing lives are changed and the Kingdom of God comes ever closer. You see, just as Jesus counted on the disciples so long ago, Jesus is counting on us. The responsibility is great, thankfully we have been gifted in extraordinary ways.