

This is the last Sunday after Pentecost; Pentecost being the longest season of the church year which began more than five months ago in Jerusalem. We trace this season to the time when the Holy Spirit came whirling as if an explosive hurricane around and through the disciples. This whirlwind of the Holy Spirit electrified the followers of Jesus, lifting them out of their timidity and fear, hurling them into the world where they began to preach, heal and baptize; demonstrating not only by their words, but through their deeds the power of the living Christ alive in the world.

Through the course of these many weeks and months we have heard stories demonstrating the power of this living faith, this trust in Christ. We heard stories of wise and foolish maidens; invited and uninvited guests at wedding feasts; persons to whom wealth and property had been entrusted using it wisely for the sake of the world; those finding pearls of great value; others sowing good seeds and reaping bountiful harvests; laborers working from dawn till night; workers in vineyards, and others casting their nets into the deep, as well as others carrying this ministry of God's power by their actions in the world.

Building one upon another Sunday after Sunday, these stories have brought us to this the last Sunday after Pentecost. Next Sunday we begin a new church year—the first Sunday of Advent and we gingerly open the door (if not already opened) on the oft-times maddening, maniacal, mayhem of Christmas preparations.

As we stand on the threshold of Advent, our expectations—like those of ancient Israel on the outskirts of the Promised Land—are full of hope and anticipation. From this vantage point we may be saying to ourselves; this year I want to do Christmas differently. This year as we make our way down into the city of Bethlehem, I want to intentionally and faithfully seek the *real* Christ in Christmas. This year I vow to do Christmas with a measured pace, with more intention, with a deeper conviction, with an open heart and, with some common sense.

The well-known poet, Mary Oliver, suggests the need all persons have of observing the cycles and circles of life through special celebrations—little things and significant things we do—Sunday worship, Advent wreaths for the first Sundays of Advent, as well as Christmas traditions: *...if you have no ceremony, no habits, ... exact and rigorous and familiar, how can you reach toward the actuality of faith, or even a moral life, except vaguely? The patterns of our lives reveal us. Our habits measure us. Our battles with our habits speak of dreams yet to become real.* (Long Life: Essays and Other Writings, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, 2004

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This morning I want to speak about habits, especially our church habits, practices, customs, observances, things—little and significant—we do to mark our spiritual lives and dreams.

We are finishing one of the great celebrations Americans have observed for more than a hundred years—Thanksgiving. Remarkably, it appears to be one of the few holidays able to maintain its integrity, uncompromised by the competitive culture in which we live. I may be naïve, but my sense is that Thanksgiving still holds its original meaning in our offering thanks and gratitude for the abundance of our lives. We gather with family and friends for a time of reflection and the rekindling of the deepest meaning of home, family and community. So many other holidays—Christmas, for example—have been re-shaped by cultural forces that have taken a once-simple celebration in the strangest of directions.

In our first lesson (epistle) this morning, the writer speaks to the Christian community/church of Colossae, a small town in western Asia Minor in the first century. News about this young Christian community is mixed. The author of the epistle is pleased that there are Christians following Christ who have committed themselves to the Gospel. On the other hand, the author has learned that there are false teachers among them leading them into strange and unfamiliar religious experiences. It is likely that a form of ancient Jewish mysticism has seized the community. These new Christians are encouraged to experience ecstatic visions of heaven and to “transport themselves” to the divine realm where they will be filled with joy and other ecstatic revelations.

In response, the author of Colossians insists that Jesus himself is the fullest expression of the divine. The author writes that Christ is the very “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” and that there is no reason

for Christian believers to seek after angels when they can worship the one “in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”. The author suggests that everything the Colossians seek through mystical experiences is already theirs in Christ, so long as they do not depart from the gospel message they have heard.

The author attempts to communicate the fact that everything anyone will ever need has already been given us in Christ Jesus. To go looking for ecstatic revelations and visions of heaven “out there”, is to miss the gift God has already given us in the here and now. In cultural language—to go looking for Christmas at Radio City Music Hall, (as delightful as that experience may be) is not the way by which the Christian finds the heart and soul of Christmas. Seeking Christ’s love and God’s gift of joy and wonder at the mall is to miss the simple revelation of Christ in the stable. The love of God is not found in the glamour and glitz, but in the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

Karen Armstrong, a onetime Christian monastic, has written some of the most important books on the relationship of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. About her own spiritual journey she has said: *Religion ....is doing things that change you. ...If you will behave in a certain way you will be transformed. The myths and laws of religion are ....life enhancing....you will not discover their truth unless you apply the myths and doctrines to your own life and put them into practice. ...The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality to “get to heaven” but to discover how to be truly human....Men and women have a potential for the divine, and are not complete unless they realize it within themselves. ...in the past my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before.*

We will not discover the truth of Christianity until and unless we “put it into practice”. When we do so, we discover who we really are in Christ. The number one charge leveled against “religious” people is that religious people say one thing and do another. We promise we will love each other on Sunday yet find all sorts of ways to slander, cheat, or ignore each other every other day of the week. The real problem for many of us is the unconscious way we substitute our beliefs **about God** for our **obedience to God**.

Who knows exactly how it starts? Perhaps we have such good imaginations that we actually believe that we have done things we have only thought about doing. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, rehearsed what you wanted to say, decided on a card instead, acknowledged what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that? If you are like me, you may have a hard time later remembering if you ever sent the card. I believe I am the kind of person (i.e. good Christian) who intends to do the right thing, but sometimes I don’t do it. Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of this “not doing” this way: “*I just roll the idea around in my head until I have sucked all the sweetness out of this nice gesture, and then move on to another generous idea I never act on.*” It’s easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. We know five or ten people who love their families but who spend little time with them. We also know of others who believe in protecting the environment but who drive cars that get around ten miles to the gallon.

It is a very peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do. The theological word for it is sin—missing the mark—which is both inevitable and forgivable (our gospel story of Jesus forgiving the criminal on the cross). It is not easily tolerated for those of us who profess to love God. It tears us up to say one thing and do another. It tears up our families, our friendships, our communities—especially church communities—when we say love and do indifference, or say right and do wrong, or say I will go and go nowhere at all. *What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it.*

God has been telling us all along for these many weeks since Pentecost—that there is no shortage of people who *say, believe, and stand for* all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will *go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do*. Whether we say yes or no to God is not as important to God as what we actually do.

On this last Sunday of the old and in anticipation of the new, we are poised over Bethlehem. We have a wonderful gift that stretches out ahead of us, time to prepare for the real Christmas as we let the glitter and glitz go for another time. Will we *do* what we *say* we will *do*? Or will the Babe have to wait another year?