

# THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER ADVENT

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- All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

Today's set of scripture readings is the perfect sandwich of bible teaching depicting the life of the disciple who accepts the responsibility and the consequences of following Jesus. And the meat of it is the middle lesson, the one from the letter to the Hebrews, a section that should be held special by All Saints' parish.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Allow me to begin by sharing with you from whence the Prayer Book Lectionary came. The Lectionary, by the way, can be found towards the very back of your Book of Common Prayer, and lays out which lessons - or "lections" - to read each Sunday over a three-year period. The 1928 Prayer Book made use of a very traditional one-year cycle for Sundays. So when the decision was made to include a 3-year cycle, you can imagine that The Lectionary Committee from the 1970's had a hard work ahead of them, although they relied heavily upon the ecumenical work already in place. That ecumenical work to which I refer was motivated primarily by the reforms decreed from the second Vatican council in 1964. The Roman Church produced their new three-year Ordo or Calendar of Lections for the Mass by 1969, which got all the mainline denominations abuzz to try to pull together a united, ecumenical lectionary, so that we were all on the same page, so to speak, on Sunday mornings. And so, in 1974, 2 years before the Draft of the new Episcopal Book of Common Prayer had to be approved by General Convention, including the lectionary to be used, what was known as the Consultation on Church Union published a joint three-year lectionary. With adjustments for our denomination, the new Prayer Book with this lectionary was approved for use in 1979. Four years later, in 1983, the culmination of the ecumenical work along with the Roman Catholics assembled what was entitled the Common Lectionary. Twenty years later there was a demand for a Revised Common Lectionary, which the Episcopal Church adopted. The Rectors of All Saints have chosen to retain the Prayer Book Common lectionary as published in 1979, an option allowed to them.

One caveat for you, that if you buy a new Book of Common Prayer, as a gift for instance, please be aware that any Prayer Book printed after 2010 will have the Revised Common Lectionary included, and not the original lectionary from 1979, the one we use on Sundays here at All Saints. Stay tuned for further updates.

Moving on, I'm sure you can see that no lectionary is perfect, devised as it is by humans, even if it contains the Word of God. There are some awkward Sundays, where the content of the lections just don't seem to thematically fit all together. However, there are the times when the Lectionary Committee hit it out of the ballpark, like the lessons

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for today, the Sunday closest to August 21, in the third year of the cycle, known as Proper 15 C.

In many of the lectionary readings for this season of Sundays after Pentecost there is a sense of the young Christian church, and of the established Old Testament Jewish community spoken to by the prophets, preparing and correcting its people for what may still lie ahead. There is a sense of trying to instill in the people a sense of faithful responsibility for their journey.

Today's lessons lay that message on us, en force. Who doesn't start to get nervous when they hear the words from God through the prophets speak of splintering and the consuming fire which is God, and judgment? Don't let it be me, Lord! But when we realize Jesus also speaks of fire and consequential division between those who believe and those who don't, it should be enough to make us all fall on our faces in abject fear, and the hoped-for repentance.

I suppose it would have been more logical to have the letter to the Hebrews read last, like a form of relief, even though it is difficult in and of itself. But I believe it is very important to us as disciples not to walk away from the fire and the necessitated division, but to carry it with us, all one picture, all one image, all one understanding. Not a linear series of releasing concepts, but a stacked sense of what is the whole picture. Its just fine then to have Hebrews in the middle, as the meat of the sandwich, and it is the preacher's job to highlight it so that it is not out there by itself, but that it is forefront to us as disciples receiving nurture and maturity from this same God. Nothing is left behind.

Before getting to Hebrews, let's review the bread of this sandwich. The words, of this morning's Gospel according to Luke, especially, may indeed be difficult to hear, perhaps even with some shifting about on your pew. The words may even seem harsh. Where are the comfortable words of Jesus, we may ask.

Consider this, though. The words of our Savior suggest the difficulty of the very mission of Jesus. If you consider Jesus' mission as we heard it read by Jesus in the synagogue, speaking of all the good news to come through his ministry, we must understand the mission as in the battle to actually deliver on the freedom that is ours in Christ. That means it is also true that the mission of Jesus Christ is to oppose and overthrow evil. It is, in a sense, a battle with sin and the devil. Can we agree that this is not an easy venture? Evil and sin are all around us; evil in the form of others who would do us harm and bring us down; sin in the form of our own self-centeredness, in the form of our wanting to be in control, in the form of our own lack of faith.

And so, Jesus, as our atonement, speaks of his own death as a baptism. The new order he came to establish, the Kingdom of God here on earth, if you will, was to be brought about only through his own costly confrontation with the sin of this world. It is a

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baptism, immersed if you will in the sin of the world, that results in his death, and at the same time for us, stretching out his loving arms on the hard wood of the cross, giving us his life for us and for our salvation.

Who would not want to make use of holy fire in such a battle? Or surprised to hear such words from the prophets and Jesus? And who does not recognize that our turning from the sinful comforts may in fact cause others to turn away from us as we follow Jesus. Consider Judas Iscariot at the last supper.

Let us now turn our attention to the Epistle, for here, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, we find a wonderful summary of what it means to be a Christian. Dr. William Barclay has called this passage from Hebrews, "one of the great, moving passages of the New Testament; and in it the writer has given us a well-nigh perfect summary of the Christian life."

As we consider this passage, and consider it in the face of what would seem the overwhelming odds of a spiritual battle we could not win even as disciples of Jesus, we will see that it sets out for us the goal for each of us who claims to be Christian. It gives us inspiration to reach the goal, it identifies the barrier to attaining the goal, but also provides us with the means to overcome the barrier.

Our goal as Christians is to attain the likeness of Christ. Our journey, the race that is set before us, is to move from our own self-centeredness to being more and more Christ-like each and every day. We begin the journey terribly self-centered. But in our water baptism, we promise to seek and to serve Christ. As we seek and serve Christ in others, and walk in his Spirit, we become more like Christ ourselves.

Our inspiration to attain the goal is the great cloud of witnesses, which surrounds us on every side. Let us never think that we embark on the journey all alone. We can't do it by ourselves.

Here is where I want to say something about the naming of our Parish. I believe strongly that the namesake of a parish can be very important for the motivation and encouragement of the members. In each congregation I have served I have spent a good deal of time getting to know the life of the namesake or the patron saint, and sharing the life and mission and perhaps the teaching of that saint - that information should be able to be converted into something of a mission statement. All Saints is a hard one to get a hold of. There's no letter from All Saints to the church in Galatia. But there is this phrase from the author of the letter to the Hebrews, that includes that famous phrase, the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, that is, All the Saints who are with us and those who have gone before. If there ever was a section of scripture for a parish named after All the Saints, it would be this one. And the message of encompassing witnesses encouraging the acceptance of discipline and growing in

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maturity in the faith and living into the sorrows of Christ and going from the cross to the power of the resurrection in the power of the Holy Spirit, relying upon Christ himself as he ministers to each of us through each other in fellowship, all as we keep our eyes on Christ and our mouths speaking of his wonderful works, well, what better statement of life and purpose for a parish. Hold on to this passage.

Still, the journey is not easy. And to embark on it without awareness of the barriers we will face on the journey is to be unprepared. The barriers are all around us. The "me first" world around us finds those who seek a life of servanthood to be a little odd. The world around us, which is based on an assumption of scarcity, does not understand those who experience the abundance of God's household. So the world around us will provide diversions, distractions and detours. We must be steadfast as we follow the way of the cross.

But there should be no question that the most important barrier is our own sinfulness. Our sinfulness comes in many forms. It comes in the form of our own lack or shallowness of faith, our desire to be in control and our own unwillingness to be generous with the gift of God's abundance in our lives. It arises when we put our own needs and our own convenience ahead of the needs of others. It comes about when our ego gets in our way. Ego has been defined as "Edging God Out." When we edge God out, we get sidetracked, we lose sight of the goal, or we forget the goal altogether. So, our own sin is the largest barrier to attaining the prize of entering God's Kingdom.

And here is where the writer to the Hebrews suggests the means to overcome the barrier.

Our endurance, coming from the gift of the Holy Spirit, is the way we get back on track and stay the course. How do you suppose marathon runners, those women and men, some of whom we have in our own parish, who run 26.2-mile races, finish the race? Somewhere between 18 and 20 miles, their muscles begin to ache and their minds begin to say, "Quit, it's not worth this much discomfort and pain. Stop now!" But the weeks and months of training they have put in has built up their endurance. Their endurance helps them overcome the pain and put the thoughts of doubt, the thoughts of quitting, out of their minds. Their endurance gives them a new source of resolve and energy. And I might add, no matter how competitive they might be, the visual of others running the marathon with them gives encouragement and says "I am not alone in my pain, I am not alone in my desire to finish this race."

Our steadfast endurance, provided by the example of Jesus Christ and sustained by the great cloud of witnesses, and empowered by our willingness to be daily filled with the Holy Spirit, keeps us focused on the goal and enables us to persevere. So, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is both the goal of our journey and our companion, the companion of all of us together, along the way.

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*Therefore, says the author, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness **without which** no one will see the Lord.*

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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