

EPIPHANY VI, YEAR A

12 February 2023

Matthew 5:21-37; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Good morning. This Sunday, in our liturgical calendar we observe After Epiphany VI, also known as 'After Vestry I'. That, I promise, will be my last bad Vestry joke...for this year. Now joking aside, I do want to underscore the statement that I made in my written report: that is, I am thankful for Vestry meetings. They are an opportunity to look back at the past year, and to pause to discern the road forward. The question that I have asked in sermons throughout this season after Epiphany, and in my report, is 'what now?'

This question was on my mind this week, and I hope that you were thinking of it as well. It has been a challenging week, for some of us personally, and for every one of us as we were bombarded with heartbreaking news story after heartbreaking news story. The weight of being bearers of the Good News to a world that is suffering is a heavy one at present. How are we to offer God's gifts of hope and peace to people who endure such acute pain?

The answer to this question of 'how' is a simple one: Holy people. Since the foundations of the earth were laid, this has always been God's plan. Now, maybe your mind goes straight to thinking of someone specific when I say, "holy people"; saints, monastics, or maybe those in holy orders. But here is the thing; the heroes of the faith, the holy people throughout Scripture, are just regular, ordinary people. Moses: he was just a humble guy. Ruth: she was a foreigner and a woman; someone with very little agency within the society that she was a part of. And yet, God did incredible things through them. God has always worked through ordinary, everyday folks, like you and me. This is why in the Old Testament he declares himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As we learned about in our Advent study, these men were very human. And yet, the Lord worked his good and perfect will through them who were willing. Of course, the embodiment of a holy life was made known to us in human form, that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, 'the plan', the Holy people that the Lord will use to deliver Good News to this world, is you. You are the plan. Now, maybe this makes you a bit uncomfortable. Perhaps you're thinking, "Reverend Sarah, if only you knew who I am, or what I have done, you wouldn't be standing in the pulpit saying that I'm the plan." You are. I have stood here in past weeks and told you that you are forgiven; that we are saved. Jesus, the Saviour, has redeemed each of us. Amen? Now I say to you, the God who has saved us, not only redeems us, but sets us apart. He who is mighty to save is mighty to make holy too. This is not something that we work at getting good at; holiness is not the sum of what we do; it is who God has created and enabled us to be. The declaration that I am holy, that you are holy, is not a statement about our own merits; it is a testimony of God's power at work in us. All we have to do is say, "Yes, Lord. I am willing to participate in your will."

As our reading from Deuteronomy this morning underscores, there is really no grey area between participating in God's will and not. We can choose to be in line with the Lord's will, to accept his invitation to live well, to be holy, as he has offered us, by walking in his ways and obeying his commandments; or not. 'Not' is not passive; it is the difference between life and death; blessing and curse. In other words, if we are not working in accordance with the Lord's salvific plan for the redemption of the world, then we are against it.

This all sounds big and heavy. But, living as a people set-apart is not complicated. The way that we are invited to live is set out for us in the Lord's commandments, which Jesus gets right to the heart of in the continuation of his Sermon on the Mount that we have read today. You see, the Commandments are not about rigidly following the rules for the sake of being legalistic; they are about turning towards a God whose concern is for the wellbeing of humankind.

We may think, for instance, that willfully holding onto a secret sin doesn't really hurt anyone other than ourselves. It is a personal choice with personal consequences. Wrong. The experience of the past three years has been a prime example of how our so-called personal choices have a great ripple effect in community. This is what Jesus is speaking about when he condemns willfully holding onto anger, or a feud with a brother or sister, or looking at a woman with lust; these are not secret, personal things that hurt us more than anyone else. They are the seeds of the greater consequence: murder, adultery, and so forth. Being willing participants in God's invitation to be a holy people means not allowing these seeds to root by ridding ourselves of our personal feelings before they grow into communal suffering.

I do want to address Jesus' teaching on divorce specifically. Were I in your place and the preacher did not speak to this, I would be disappointed. Divorce is the source of acute pain in our world, most of all for those who are going through it. My guess is that each of us in this room has been affected by the end of a marriage; I know that I have shared with you that this is the case within my own family. When Jesus quotes the Old Testament commandment, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce," the context of this was women being abandoned in a society where there was no social safety net apart from male relatives; that is, fathers, husbands, and sons. Women who were not given a certificate of divorce, were in effect, left with no opportunities for protection by remarriage. What Jesus is getting at, is the heart of protecting women in society; that is, issuing a certificate of divorce does not get one off the hook for discarding their spouse. People are not disposable, and when we behave as though they are, this is a sin that has a ripple effect. It is important for me to say to anyone who has been in a marriage that didn't honour their being created in the image of God, because of abuse, or adultery, or neglect; particularly if this passage was quoted to you as reason to remain married; I'm very sorry. If you have been touched by divorce and guilt has ensnared you as a result, I invited you to be free of our guilt, starting now. Guilt is not a feeling that comes from God. Furthermore, Jesus who preached this sermon is the same man who said to the woman caught in adultery, after saving her from a horrible death sentence, "neither do I condemn you. Go on your way and from now on do not sin again," (John 8:11 NRSV). Did you catch what happened there? Not only is she saved from the consequences of her mistakes, she is invited to be holy. There is nothing in your past that prohibits holiness from

being your future. God is not only our peace when we look at our past, he is our hope as we look forward.

One of my commitments to you, friends, for this season where we share life together, is to look forward in hope with you; to help you discern, 'what now', both personally and for this church community of St. George's. We may feel led, at some point, to engage in evangelistic outreach, or consider a fresh expression, or reach out to community partners: any of those may be in our future. But this I am sure of now: you are the plan. God has called you to be set apart for a time such as this. The Lord who saved us also makes us holy. Holy people are individuals who others want to be around, because it is knowing the goodness of God in a person. A community of holy people is what our suffering world is longing for. May our response to God today be: Yes, Lord. Amen.