

As the Bell Choir were rehearsing this morning, our Director stopped them and said I'd like to BEGIN AFRESH. To which I responded that I sometimes feel like that in the middle of the Sermon! Which someone replied "THERE ARE NO RULES ONLY EXPECTATIONS." According to Genesis, GOD breathed a breath of GOD into each one of us, gifting us with life. And according to Judaism when we die that breath of GOD, that Spirit, returns to be a part of GOD. Judaism has throughout history had identification of A DAY OF THE LORD, YOM YHWH, sometimes envisioned as a Judgement Day. Sometimes as the Incarnation when GOD became one with us in the Messiah, sometimes as a Second Coming. In large measure the question today is how do you envision GOD? How do envision Life? Is the LORD a GOD of WRATH, or a Loving Savior? One who suffers for us, or our JUDGE? I need for us to begin this day with clarification of a few words. An APOCALYPSE is not necessarily the END OF THE WORLD, but the end as we had known it. When Pearl Harbor occurred, America since the Revolutionary War had never before been attacked. When 9-11 happened it was the first time on the Mainland, and not only Military installations but Finance. We can now identify that life was different Before COVID & After COVID, each of these was an Apocalypse.

The Book of Revelation identifies the breaking open of seven sealed scrolls, seven revelations to John, addressing crises in seven different churches, all at the time of the Fall of Rome. Different from the majority of the Epistles, which were each addressed to one particular church, part of the impact of this was that all 7 would know the problems of each other and hold one another accountable. My favorite complaint is the church at Laodicea, which is neither too hot nor too cold, they are not passionate about anything, they cannot get fired up, everything is acceptable. The point of our having Regular Congregational Meetings is to be this transparent and hold one another accountable! Whenever there is an Apocalypse or a new Revelation we stop to question. When there are life circumstances a death, a retirement, a birth or wedding, all of these are times when we stop to question WHAT DO I BELIEVE? Where are my commitments?

At the end of his life, JOSHUA calls forth all the Nation and asks for a decision, a Commitment of Faith. Joshua was born into slavery where there was worship of all kinds of idols and gods, of Pharaoh as god. Joshua had been with Moses throughout the wilderness, searching for the Promised Land. Joshua had then led the people as they came across the Jordan River into the Land as they fought for the City of Ai and the City of Jericho, as they labored and took possession over years. Now Joshua says "CHOOSE!"

You can worship the gods of Egypt, or the gods of the Canaanites, as for me, we worship the LORD. All the people immediately respond, "Of course we believe in GOD and will be faithful... Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, I do, I do, I Will!" To which Joshua stops them and says, "No, be careful, because if you commit to GOD and are not faithful, it will be harder on you. So Choose this day." Whenever I read this passage, I am reminded of Couples getting married, and the Pastor asks them "Do you intend to get married?" When you have known each other long enough to get engaged, probably living together, and have merged their bank accounts, when the whole community including their Great Aunt are gathered, it is a little late to ask if they do not intend to be married! But in a wedding, asking that question sets up their confessing their vows to each other, which is what Joshua is demanding of us this day by "CHOOSE!"

AMOS too, makes this THE DAY OF THE LORD, yet Amos comes at a very different time in history, with a different feel to the prophecy. Hundreds of years after coming into the Land, after the rise of the Monarchies of Saul, David and Solomon, the nation of Israel was divided, with Israel in the North and Judah in the South. The people of Israel were further divided between those who demanded a King in the bloodline of David and those wanting a King with the Faith of David. AMOS was a Farm Laborer, sometimes a Herdsman, in other places a Dresser of Sycamore trees, from Judah, sent by God to Call Israel to CHOOSE. Amos is one of my favorite people from the Hebrew Scriptures. Kings sit on a Throne in Palaces. Warriors

are out ahead of everyone in battle. Shepherds sit up atop Hillsides, keeping watch over their flocks. But a Herdsman leads from among, a Herdsman is one with the Herd, trodding the same path, eating, living the same as those around them. And a DRESSER of SYCAMORE TREES, I once had a Sycamore, have any of you? Sycamores have a bark that is always peeling, and branches that left to themselves cross meaning that in a wind they will crack against each other in conflict. Sycamores, like the Church, take constant maintenance. Amos has numerous images as Prophecy, that like a Parable require us to identify and after seeing ourselves in the story have a hook that catches us. Amos says be careful of the DAY OF THE LORD, do not imagine that simply by being Baptized, singing in the Choir, an Elder or Deacon, or a Member of Valley Presbyterian Church you will be saved. The DAY OF THE LORD will be like RUNNING FROM A LION, only to run into A BEAR, finding shelter in a house, but as you place your hand on the wall you find a SNAKE. This probably makes most of us scratch our head, saying "WHAT IS PASTOR CRAIG TALKING ABOUT?" Who among us were able to OUTRUN THE LION OF CANCER, only afterward to run FACE TO FACE WITH THE GRIZZLY BEAR of DEPRESSION? Who have worked to have the safety and security of a home, only there to be bitten by the FANGS of DIVORCE? The day of Reckoning, our DAY OF THE LORD, the Second Coming demands that we CHOOSE What we will do with our lives in faith? Is our Faith like tinkling Brass, or Poetry, Bells and Harps, or are we committed to FAITH IN GOD like standing beneath the WATERFALL of JUSTICE, wading Waist deep into an ICY RIVER of RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Is there any of us, who do not recognize this Parable of Jesus, from Matthew and Luke, we even had another variation of this in Matthew several weeks ago told as a Wedding Feast. The point is first to recognize that all we have, everything in our lives has come as gifts entrusted to us by GOD. Second, whether we will risk everything we have for GOD, knowing we could lose it all, even our lives. Third, that sometimes our image of GOD becomes so obscured, that we bury what we have. JUDAISM had a Law against USURY, Lending at exorbitant interest. AND in this Parable to underscore just how insulted GOD is by burying the TALENT because you imagine GOD unjust, demanding what we think is more than GOD's allotment, The KING suggests that at the least we should have invested what we have been given with LOAN SHARKS, so while we would demonstrate how corrupt we think GOD is, at least GOD would have gotten something out of our pound of flesh.

This morning, I feel the need to share a personal story from several decades ago. I had been Pastor of a church for only a few years, when I discovered that the Part-Time Children's Choir Director, who had been a lifelong member of the church was challenging my leadership and the decisions of the Session. The Personnel Committee called us both in to try to resolve this, and she much like the man with One Talent stated her convictions that "The Pastor and Session want me to trust them, I cannot trust any minister." The Personnel Chair called a Time-out and dismissed us both from the room while they talked. The Committee brought her back in and accepted her resignation, then called me in, where I asked what just happened. They stated that "In a church, if you cannot trust the Pastor, or the Session, if you cannot trust GOD, it does not matter who you are or how good of friends we might be, you cannot work in a church." While in the moment, this triggered old wounds for me, and I feared what she said to others would trigger old resolved conflicts within the church, a few days later I stopped and recognized "I need to forgive her." She has not apologized or asked to be forgiven, it probably will not matter to her. But I cannot go forward in my faith as Pastor of this church, with this burden that really does not belong to me.

I want to conclude this morning with the conviction that THE DAY OF THE LORD, THE 2nd COMING, may not be the end of the world, the world as we know it, or the end of all Creation? As much as The Day of the LORD could be this week, when we entertain family and friends, when we sit down at the Table to break Bread and lift the Cup with one another. How do you envision those at Table? Are these people you

trust? Are these ones who hurt you? Is life Good or Evil? SO, Forgive the ones who have hurt you, insulted you, not trusted you, in order that we can CHOOSE THIS DAY TO TRUST GOD IN THANKSGIVING!