

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me; And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified. Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.

“And now, saith [**SETH**] the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee. Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew [**SHOW**] yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall

lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim [**SIGH-nimm**].

“Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the General Epistle of James.⁴

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it

¹⁴ Romans 8:38-39.

¹⁵ Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.

is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Scripture tells us that God is the author of our salvation, that it was all His plan, and that it is His gracious Will that sustains us throughout this life, and guarantees the joy of eternal life in Christ. None of these good things were our idea, nor were they a grudging benefit in answer to our pleading. Our entire inheritance given to us in Christ's Testament, the New Covenant, has been the will of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit from all eternity.

In the sixteenth chapter of St. John's Gospel, in Jesus' long discourse after supper, He spoke of His coming departure.⁵

His words were beyond the understanding of the disciples, words that demonstrated how fully, how detailed, is the counsel of God's Will.⁶ Jesus said to them just enough, in that discourse, for them to remember later, at the time when the Holy Spirit would be with them as the other Comforter, the other *paraklētos*, and as the Spirit of Truth.

When that time would arrive, the Day of Pentecost, when they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit,⁷ they would begin to be the voice of God in the earth, the messengers by whom the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment. They would know the truth and be able to teach it to all generations that have followed. This plan from eternity, the eternal counsel of God's Will, has meaning for us as the Church, and for each one of you as a member of the Body of Christ.

To begin with, based on the promise made here by the Lord Jesus Christ, you may believe the teaching that has been handed down throughout the centuries. The words, "*Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth,*" are not spoken to any of you as an individual. You cannot decide the truth, in this sense, for yourself.

The truth has been revealed; and so, from earliest times, the Church has heard the voice of the Lord above all in the books set apart as Holy Scripture, the New Testament books recognized very much as we have them in our Canon alongside the books of the Law, and of the Prophets and Sages of Israel who had spoken before of the coming of Christ, all quoted as having special authority by the earliest Christian writers. In spite of popular fiction to the contrary, the New Testament was *recognized* by the Church, it was a *vox populi* recognition—yes, with a few questions raised about II Peter and Revelation, and a few people who believed in a book called *The Shepherd of Hermas*. But the overwhelming consensus throughout the Church was that the voice of God was recognized clearly in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, as that same Voice

trust Him whether you have prosperity and healing, or whether you have a share of suffering for a time.

Only one thing can stand between you and the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and it is not a created thing, that is, it is not a thing that God made:¹⁴ That one thing is unrepentant willful sin, or, as James calls it, "superfluity of wickedness." Remove all such barriers, if they are in your life, and you may trust that whatever comes is, ultimately, in the hands of the one you may trust absolutely. Then we have only one thing left to do, and that is to give thanks. In the words of the 116th Psalm:

*"What reward shall I give unto the LORD * for all the benefits that he hath done unto me? * I will receive the cup of salvation, * and call upon the Name of the LORD."*

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The Rev'd Robert Hart¹⁵
May 6, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Fourth Sunday after Easter, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 32 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (CIPBC 1963).

³ Isaiah 49:1-13 (KJV).

⁴ James 1:1-27 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 16:5-15.

⁶ Ephesians 1:11.

⁷ Acts 1:5.

⁸ I Timothy 3:15.

⁹ Acts 17:11.

¹⁰ St. John 1:14.

¹¹ Romans 3:26.

¹² Romans 6:9.

¹³ Isaiah 49:14-16.

The impassible God, the God who does not change, will not forget you.

*“But Zion said, The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.”*¹³

In some religious circles it is popular to promise that everyone who has faith, that is *real deep* faith, will be healed of all earthly sickness, will be in perfect health, will be rich, and live in victory over all things all the time. By twisting the Scriptures and wrenching Bible verses violently from their context, they present this burdensome, impossible, and dangerous doctrine, and often extract great sums of money from people looking to escape from desperate poverty by what actually constitutes a practice of attempted magic. But these “faith and prosperity” preachers will get old themselves, and they will die the death of all men.

Real faith carries with it trust. If God seems to hear your prayers and grant you what you ask of Him, it is because of His love and wisdom. But if He seems never to hear a word you utter, and does not grant your prayers, and often seems as if He is far away, that too is because of His love and wisdom. He need not prove His love. He proved His love for you already on the Cross and calls you His friend from the Cross. It is the same love and the same Fatherly wisdom from God who does not change. You may have faith enough, for a grain of mustard seed is enough, and yet have a share of suffering that seems impossible to bear. Another may hate God and seem to have all his heart’s desire. What matters for you is that God knows what is best for each of His children, and so you may trust His love and wisdom, the love of the One who has the scars in His hands and feet, with the wound of the spear in His side. You may

had been recognized in the Old Testament all along. No one imposed any of it, certainly not any emperor.

And even with its human imperfections and sins, the Church has been what St. Paul called her, when writing to St. Timothy, “the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”⁸ What it means for you, as an individual, whether or not you are a scholar, is that when people come literally knocking at your door with another gospel about another Christ, you may be certain that the Holy Spirit, in His role as the Spirit of Truth, guided the Apostles into all truth, and the Church has received by Revelation what it has passed on to you and your children with authority, especially as it is summarized in that great Creed we have said together this day.

The old phrase from what we call the Vincentian Canon is not true literally but is true with poetic license. The phrase translates into English as “That which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.” In fact, nothing has been “believed everywhere, always and by all,” perhaps not even that two plus two equals four. But, using poetic license, it tells us that from earliest times the Church was guided by pastors and teachers who received the teaching of the Apostles and understood the Scriptures with a like mind. The poetic license by which we say “That which has been believed everywhere, always and by all,” is, in fact, that they heard their Master’s voice in words of the Apostles and preserved that same doctrine in the Scriptures, which they understood.

What makes us Catholic people is that we receive not only the books they believed in, but we receive those books as they understood them, not with some novel interpretation. As Anglicans, every one of you is encouraged to read the Scriptures yourselves. We, among the clergy, do not teach the whims of human beings, the doctrines merely of men, hoping that we may rely on your ignorance, so as not to be discovered. We teach the plain meaning of Scripture relying on you, that

reading it daily yourselves, you may glean the truth from what we say, however imperfectly we may express it.

Be like the noble Bereans, and search the Scriptures daily to see if what we say is so.⁹ And be guided by the wisdom of the Church from its earliest generations. Let me make this simple: if someone's teaching and preaching does not agree with that Creed we said, you may be confident that it does not agree with Scripture; and that means that it contradicts what the Spirit of Truth revealed to the Church. By the way, the Holy Spirit does not grow in His understanding, He does not learn new things, and He does not change his mind. His wisdom is perfect and eternal.

This brings us to the Epistle we heard, the words of St. James, that with God there is "*no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*" In fact, we have two phrases from that Epistle that can cause problems to modern ears. This phrase, "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" sounds so grand and musical that we may fail to think about it. The other is "superfluity of naughtiness," because it makes sin sound trivial. Today we think of "naughtiness" merely as childish misbehavior, and that suggests innocence. The Third Millennium Bible is almost word for word the King James, but with a few differences. It says "superfluity of wickedness." We need to understand both of these phrases, and to understand them in context.

First of all, however, notice that James affirms what I told you, that our salvation is God's gracious Will in eternity. It was all His initiative. "*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth,*" says James. That means that everything that happened in Christ's coming, when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,¹⁰ was the plan of God in eternity, the one will of the whole Trinity. It was God's will to beget us again, that we could be born again unto eternal life, delivered from sin and death. Christ delivered us from sin and the consequences of sin by His Cross.

This was not Jesus' coming to pacify His angry Father, as some have accused us of teaching. This was God satisfying the just requirements of His own holiness, acting in His own love, and also healing the conscience of each person who repents. God saved us in that terrible way, by the Cross, because our condition of sin was truly terrible, as St. Paul wrote: "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."¹¹

God's love turned on His own holiness and perfect righteousness, and His own holiness and perfect righteousness turned on His love, so that God Himself, in the Person of the Son, Jesus who is the Word incarnate, took the full weight of human sin on Himself and bore it unto death. This was the will of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the eternal counsel of God's Will. Therefore God justifies sinners, and is also just in doing so; for on the Cross He took away the sin of the world. This is the greatest love story of all.

He conquered death also, which is what the season of Easter is all about. His Resurrection will be our resurrection when He comes again in glory. As he cannot die again,¹² we too will become immortal through Him, and live forever. Now that is the Gospel, and never let anyone tell you another gospel; for there is no other Gospel in truth.

So that phrase, that sounds so grand we may fail to hear its meaning, ought to comfort us greatly: "*The Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*" The word for this in academic theology is "Impassibility." It means, simply, God does not change. He does not change His mind, He does not change His nature, He does not change His Will, He does not change at all. In all eternity God is perfect in three Persons. He has no need of learning, He does not need to gain wisdom (certainly not from puny creatures), He does not need to mature, and nothing has ever created a change in God. He is perfect in all eternity. The Cross and Resurrection did not change God; they changed us.