

**SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER**  
**The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany<sup>1</sup>**

**The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,<sup>2</sup> Supply Priest**

**Lessons:<sup>3</sup>**

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the fourth Chapter of Amos.<sup>4</sup>

“Come to Beth-el [**BETH-ull**], and transgress; at Gilgal [**GILL-gal**] multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years: And offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, and proclaim and publish the free offerings: for this liketh you, O ye children of Israel, saith [**SETH**] the Lord GOD.

“And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel. For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and cre-

ateth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.”

*Or,*

Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of Amos.<sup>5</sup>

“Hear ye this word which I take up against you, even a lamentation, O house of Israel. The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise: she is forsaken upon her land; there is none to raise her up. For thus saith **[SETH]** the Lord GOD; The city that went out by a thousand shall leave an hundred, and that which went forth by an hundred shall leave ten, to the house of Israel.

“For thus saith **[SETH]** the LORD unto the house of Israel, Seek ye me, and ye shall live: But seek not Beth-el **[BETH-ull]**, nor enter into Gilgal **[GILL-gal]**, and pass not to Beer-sheba **[bee-air-SHE-buh]**: for Gilgal **[GILL-gal]** shall surely go into captivity, and Beth-el **[BETH-ull]** shall come to nought. Seek the LORD, and ye shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Beth-el **[BETH-ull]**. Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The LORD is his name: That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress. They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly. Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Holy Communion for Proper 15B according to the lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> *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 33 (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).

<sup>4</sup> Amos 4:4-end (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> Amos 5:1-24 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> St. John 6:41-end (KJV).

right. Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph. Therefore the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord, saith [SETH] thus; Wailing shall be in all streets; and they shall say in all the highways, Alas! alas! and they shall call the husbandman to mourning, and such as are skilful of lamentation to wailing. And in all vineyards shall be wailing: for I will pass through thee, saith [SETH] the LORD. Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light. As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.<sup>6</sup>

“... The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith [SETH], I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at

the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. Not that any man hath seen the Father, save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum [***kah-PURR-nay-umm***]. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

loves them just the way they are, but the strong demanding Master who confronts evil wherever He sees it, whether in the practices of powerful religious leaders, or in the systems and laws that oppress the poor, or in the deep recesses of the hearts of His followers. That Jesus is to be found wherever the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered.

For too long, the denominations I have described—the old “mainline” Protestant bodies and The Episcopal Church under the old leadership structure—have preached whatever gospel the shifting tides of cultural fashion have called for. For too long, these churches have allowed the world to pose the questions and define the issues. The issues that are today tearing apart the Church are not issues that grow out of the faith tradition of the Church itself. The ordination of women, the ordination of gays, the use of inclusive language for God including alternative baptismal formulas and blessings, gay marriages, abortion rights—these are power issues brought into the Church by the late-20th Century emphasis on individual rights. They do not belong on the Church’s agenda.

So small groups of Christians are now gathering in counter-cultural cells for prayer, Bible study, and mutual support. New statements of faith are being formulated. Official pronouncements are being ignored as the emerging Church struggles to reclaim her own Christ-given agenda. And what is that agenda?

Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” That’s our agenda. That’s our business.

And there’s just one more thing before I stop. A promise accompanies that order from our Lord, and the promise is this: “*I am with you always, to the close of the age.*”

long as Jesus is presented as He presents Himself and not as many with less-than-robust faith present Him.

But I must caution you to be very careful not to confuse loyalty to Christ with loyalty to any particular place. The true heirs of Abraham's faith must recognize that they, like him, are strangers and pilgrims with no permanent home in this world. Those who believe in the Ascension of the risen Christ must recognize that He is no longer confined to any particular place.

When the Jews became too attached to their glorious Temple, God took it away from them, sent them into a foreign land, and forced them to learn to worship Him there. When the Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people should worship,*" Jesus replied, "*The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.*"

So Peter has really phrased the question properly, and it is a rhetorical question. His question is not "*Where shall we go?*" but "*To whom shall we go?*" And he answers his own question when he continues, "*You have the words of eternal life.*"

The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century declared that the Church exists where the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered. In other words, it is *what* happens, and not *where* it happens, that defines the true Church, and it is in that true Church that the real Christ is to be found.

And there we have it. If we are to be faithful, we must go where Jesus is. The real Jesus. Not the phony smiling anti-Christ who pats everyone on the head and tells them that God

"From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Gospel: "*To whom shall we go?*" In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Homily:**

That is the question that confronts many people in "mainstream" Protestant denominations today, including those within The Episcopal Church. For various reasons, people are leaving the church. Sometimes those reasons are similar to the ones the people had in this morning's Gospel.

It was fine when Jesus was going around healing people and telling great stories, arguing with the entrenched religious authorities, and welcoming people from the margins of society into His circle. But when He started talking about Himself as the bread of life, and the only way to the Father, and the giver of eternal life, that was more than some people were willing to buy into.

It is also more than many people today are willing to buy into, so when they hear such claims being made, they draw

back. A church that preaches such a Gospel is too “narrow” and too “rigid” and too “fundamentalist” for them.

There are churches such people can find where they will not hear those claims. They will hear only about an inclusive love of God devoid of judgment and about a Jesus who seeks to enlist our help in righting all the wrongs of society. Usually, however, the people who are put off by the claims that Jesus makes for Himself, and the demands He makes on those who would follow him, simply do not go to church at all.

The problem, however, is that whenever you leave a place, you go to another place. Everybody has to be somewhere, and if you are not going to follow Jesus, you have to follow somebody else, even if that somebody is yourself and your own ideas about God and religion and morality. That’s what Joshua said to the people of Israel: *“If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose whom you will serve.”* For many people, the choice is to serve themselves.

On the other side are those who accept the outrageous claims that Jesus makes. Those people want to go where His claims are honored and where others also believe them. That is one reason that so many faithful people are leaving long-established denominations, including The Episcopal Church. They are hearing a different Gospel, a strange Gospel that speaks only of acceptance and tolerance and says nothing of judgement and repentance and forgiveness and holiness and sacrifice. So they leave. But where do they go?

Some go to Rome. Some go to conservative Protestant churches. A few go to the ancient Orthodox Churches of the East, and some go to one of the so called “continuing Churches” that follow the Anglican way but are not under the jurisdiction of The Episcopal Church. All too many people, however, fall into the trap of thinking that can go nowhere. They stay home,

or they go to the mall, or they go to some serene and scenic place in the great outdoors.

But that’s not really going nowhere. That’s going somewhere. You always have to go somewhere, even if that other place is your own living room. So the question remains for those who are unhappy on both sides of this great dispute: To whom shall we go?

Jesus said, *“I go to prepare a place for you.”* And that’s great, but most of us do not want to go to that place just yet. We need a place to go to and stay in the meantime.

There are people who are working to prepare places to go here on earth. New leadership is emerging in the Church. Networking is replacing vertical authority structures, and this networking is crossing denominational as well as geographic boundaries. Old institutional structures are passing away. New structures are being born that will be friendly to those who take seriously the claims and demands of our Lord. The death throes of the old order mingle with the birth pangs of the new as old leadership struggles to retain its power. These are apocalyptic times.

But the new structures are not finished and the new Anglican churches that are springing up are few in number and hard to find. The independent churches require you to trade in your liturgy and your music and your sophisticated theology for simplistic music and messages full of emotion and lacking in depth.

You can always stay where you are of course, and I suspect that most of us will do that. There are many things that tie us to this place, and as long as we continue to hear the Apostolic faith preached from this pulpit and we can do that as long as we are caught up in the ancient liturgy of the Church, and as