

Give Thanks for Tomorrow?!—Living in God's Love

Psalm 16:5-11; John 13-17 (selected verses)

Focus: No one will take your joy from you—John 16:22

Give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises, for knowing whatever tomorrow may bring, the Word is our promise always, forever we rest in God's keeping and live in God's love . . . 2023 Stewardship Hymn,
What Gift Can We Bring

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.—Jeremiah 29:11

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 16:5-11

Our first Scripture Lesson is from the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms, Psalm 16. And yes, you're right: that's the same first Scripture Lesson as last week. It's not that I've only just now discovered cut-and-paste . . . I promise. It's that the Psalms are poetry, and poetry demands repetition.

The language of poetry itself—its rhymes and rhythms, its movements and meanings—makes you want to hear it again and again. But more than that, for poetry to work, to really work, it has to get inside you, become part of who you are and how you see the world. And that demands repetition.

It's like your favorite song or movie or TV show—you want to hear it, you want to watch it. Again and again *and* again. And you love it . . . more and more each time. One psychologist in explaining something called “binge-watching” (aside: have you heard of that?) puts it this way: “watching the same entertainment piece multiple times *reaffirms that there is order in the world: it can create a sense of safety and comfort on a primal level.*”

So to repeat what I said last week: Psalm 16, like our stewardship hymn that Dave and Rachael mentioned, has a [hands] past, present, and future movement, from [hands] from “I have a goodly heritage,” to “The Lord is at my right hand,” to “In your right hand, Lord, are pleasures forevermore.”

And that entire movement [hands] is summed up in the first two lines: “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.” In other words:

My whole life—all that I am, have been, and ever will be—is in your hands, Lord, and I am glad for it. Listen again for God's Word to us in Psalm 16:

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night, my heart instructs me.

I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Second Scripture Lesson: John 13-17 (selected verses)

The best stories are the ones you feel. The ones that get inside you, and that *you* get inside—those are the ones that stay with you.

And that's true for Bible stories, too—Old and New Testament. But it gets harder when you get to John's Gospel, also known as the Fourth Gospel. In the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus tells stories: unforgettable stories, replete with memorable characters and striking images, quotable sayings, and deft, surprising turns—all of which have the power and depth to get inside you.

In John's Gospel, well . . . Jesus speaks mostly in . . . Well, in what the scholars call, "discourses."

Synonyms for "discourse" include "lecture," "treatise," "dissertation," "disquisition," and yes, "sermon." These discourses, rather than having memorable characters and striking images, tend to be abstract and dense, daunting and hard to follow . . . And long. The most common reaction of his listeners is, "Huh? What did he say?"

The longest of these long discourses is "The Farewell Discourse" that Jesus delivers to the disciples on the night of his arrest, the night before his crucifixion. It covers five whole chapters, and ends with Jesus praying a pastoral prayer: a prayer for himself, for his immediate followers, and for all his future followers—which includes us—a prayer that comprises all of Chapter 17.

In addition to being long, The Farewell Discourse is also. . . well, how should I put it? A little *repetitive*, kind of *meandering*: Jesus says the same things over and over . . . and (sometimes) over again.

Now modern Bible scholars have an explanation for this. The words Jesus said that night were important, so of course the disciples took pains to remember them. And of course they remembered them differently as people will. So by the time, the author and editor—authors and editors?—of John’s Gospel finally got around to writing it all down, different versions—many different versions? Both oral and written?—were already in circulation.

So the editor (editors?) did the best they could, stitching these sources together, erring on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion. Hence the repetition.

And there is a certain plausibility to this. With some ingenuity, you can hypothesize about the various sources, find the seams where they’ve been stitched together, and, with some cutting and pasting, create a more linear, less repetitive version of what he said that night—probably . . . maybe. Of the making and unmaking of doctoral dissertations there is no end.

The problem is that, that way, you don’t feel the story—it doesn’t get inside you, and you don’t get inside it. So let’s try a different way: the reason Jesus says the same thing over and over again is that the disciples need to hear it over and over again.

Hearing the same thing again, and again, and again—especially promises of ultimate well-being, in times of great distress— *reaffirms that there is order in the world: it can create a sense of safety and comfort on a primal level.*”

So in order to feel the story, to get us inside it, I *am* going to cut and paste to highlight the promise he makes. But I’ll also try to highlight the repetition of that promise, as well as the sorrow, fear and confusion on the part of the disciples that necessitates such repetition.

It’s aptly named The Farewell Discourse: Jesus is saying good-bye; his hour has come. But he speaks out of love for his disciples, and promises them that they will always have his love and live in His love. It’s all summed up right at the beginning: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” And that goes for us too. Listen now for God’s Word to us, John Chapters 13-17:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?”

Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow later. . . .

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me, if it were not so would I have told you so . . . I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

And Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. . . . I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

And Phillip said to him, “Teacher, show us the Father.”

And Jesus said: “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid . . . If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father. It is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Holy Spirit will not come to you.”

Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by this?” Jesus knowing what they wanted to ask him, said, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant just now?”

“Listen: you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.

Sermon

Give thanks for tomorrow *whatever* tomorrow may bring. Stop there. Now, how are we supposed to do that? I mean, if I don’t know what tomorrow may bring, how am I supposed to give thanks for it?

Not knowing, I may be anxious or worried about it. Or I may lapse into a passive fatalism—“Tomorrow? Whatever.” Or I may try to maintain a naive, wishful optimism—“Tomorrow. Tomorrow. The sun will come out . . . Tomorrow.” But give thanks? For *whatever* happens? “Huh? What did he say?”

Because that *is* what Jesus is saying to the disciples, Give thanks for tomorrow: “Tomorrow, I am going away, going to die, so give thanks: it’s better for you and for me, that I go; and if you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going.”

You can understand—can't you?—their sorrow, their fear, *and* their confusion.

He is their beloved teacher and their friend; they have left everything to follow him, and they have heard and they have seen—and perhaps they have even begun to understand—who he is: the son of God, the Word of God, the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd, the light of the world, the messiah, living water, true bread, the savior of the world.

And now he tells them he's leaving them. (Really, he's been telling them for some time now, but they haven't been able to hear it.) Worse, he tells them that one of their own number will—already has—betrayed him. Tomorrow, he will be condemned, be crucified, and die. A horrible death. Tomorrow. The sun will *not* come out tomorrow: at noon, darkness will cover the whole land.

And still Jesus promises that everything will be OK, better than OK, all this is for the best: You will have peace—my peace, he promises them, a peace that the world cannot give. And you will have joy—complete joy, a joy that can never be taken from you. I will be with you, always:

“Believe in God, believe also in me, if it were not so would I have told you so.” I promise you.

To all of which, the disciples say to him, in so many words, and with all their questions and with all their hearts, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief—say it again.”

To believe those promises, they need to hear them again . . . and again. Because those promises, and especially the repetition of those promises—a repetition that the Holy Spirit will continue even after he has left them—*reaffirm that there is order in the world—even in the midst of chaos—and so it can create a sense of safety and comfort on a primal level.*”

I think that's the reason so many of us did so much “binge-watching”—watching our favorite shows and movies over and over again—during the pandemic. Well, yes, we were stuck at home and there was nothing else to do—that's true.

But more than that, their familiarity, their predictability, their repetition—my adult children can still recite long swaths of dialogue from the Harry Potter and Star Wars movies, and when they do, it's like their little kids again, their faces just light up in joy—that repetition, during the pandemic, gave us a sense of order amidst the chaos, a deep sense of safety and comfort which the world did not at the time—and still does not—offer.

Which is why this church still needs to be here—and we still need to be here at church. So we can hear God's promises again and again—because *we* need to.

And I don't mean only—or even primarily—in the sermon. But in education and conversation, in music and in prayer, in mission and in caring, in friendship with God and one another through our Lord—“On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”—in all these ways, we hear—and we live—the promise again and again. It gets inside us and we get inside it—the promise that there is an order to the world, and that things will be OK, better than

OK; the promise that, in him, we will know—indeed, we already know—peace and joy, complete and eternal

And this promise is not just for us; it's for the world. The world needs to hear the promise, too. "There is a joy beyond the walls of this world," Frederick Buechner said. The world hungers for that joy—we all do—even if it does not know it and cannot name it.

And so this church—being the church in worship and music, mission, education, and caring—needs to be here as a witness to the world, to witness to that joy and the peace beyond the walls of this world that Jesus promises in his Farewell Discourse.

And here I want to add a word of appreciation for that Farewell Discourse. Like all the discourses in John's Gospel, it's not as immediately accessible or as immediately memorable as his sayings and stories in the other three Gospels. No arguing that.

But it has a sacredness, a sadness and solemnity, a joyfulness and a poetry—poetry demands repetition—that fits what he's saying, when he's saying it, and who he's saying it to. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friends"—that's in the Farewell Discourse too.

When the Farewell Discourse gets inside you, and when you get inside it, you can feel it, especially in the pastoral prayer at the end, which really comes down to this:

My whole life—all that I am, have been, and ever will be—is in your hands, Lord, and I am glad for it.

A prayer that Jesus prays for himself, for his immediate disciples,—and for us. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

"Plans are worthless, Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "but planning is everything."

The future is unpredictable—"full of surprises," as our hymn puts it—so nothing will turn out as planned. If nothing else, the past two and a half years have taught us that. But we still have to make plans—as individuals, as families, and as a church—because nothing gets accomplished without them.

And so we make plans for tomorrow, trusting in God's promise. We don't have to succumb to anxiety and worry or passive fatalism or naive wishful optimism. There is order in the world—an order and a purpose and an end—even though it sometimes seems otherwise—and so we can make plans, carefully and confidently. Which is really what Stewardship season is all about—planning for tomorrow—for the church, and so for ourselves, for the world, and especially for the future.

How can we give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises, *whatever* tomorrow may bring?

The Word is our promise always, forever we rest in God's keeping and live in God's love.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.