



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 18, 2018
THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Thanks?
Matthew 6:25-33; Mark 13:1-8

I guess it happens to the best of us, certainly to the rest of us! We become our parents. What I mean is that we begin life carefree and unencumbered by worries of any kind. Thankfully, our parents—maybe more so our mothers—do their best to keep us safe. They teach us the basic rules like brush your teeth, wash your hands, look both ways before crossing the street, don't take candy from a stranger, and be home before dark. They try to prepare us for the world which they tell us is big and beautiful and just waiting for us to take it on. Yet, every day is not sunny so wear your rain boots and coat and hat and gloves. Take your umbrella and buckle your seat belt. Don't talk to strangers and call us when you get there and before you leave to come home. Don't stay out late because as wonderful as the world is there are a lot of bad things and people and we love you so much that we don't want anything to happen to you, but it probably will so be sure to put on clean underwear every day!

We roll our eyes and mildly protest, but know we will never win that battle. So we leave and begin taking off the hat and gloves and boots and coat so that we can move and breath and enjoy whatever we are going to do. Before we know it, we become adults and tell our children or the young people around us that the world is a wonderful place that is big and beautiful and just waiting for us to take it on, but . . . be careful! God bless our parents and older adults and us but sometimes, after everyone gives us advice on how careful we need to be in the world, we feel like Ralphie and his little brother in *A Christmas Story*. Their mother bundled them up in snow suits and coats and gloves and hats so that when they went out to play all they could do was waddle along because they were too wrapped up to enjoy the snow!

Jesus was no different. He became his mother and father. Matthew quotes the encouraging, excited Jesus who recognizes the challenges of life but is eager to launch us into the world: "I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food or clothing? Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care

of them. Aren't you worth more than birds?" (Matthew 6:25-26 CEV). You can almost hear Bobby McFerrin singing in the background, "Don't worry. Be happy!"

The Gospel of Mark, which is older, more direct and plain spoken, shows us the cautious, realistic, reserved Jesus. As the disciples stand marveling at the immensity and majesty of the Temple, Jesus snaps them out of their reverie by warning them that this magnificent building, an engineering and architectural masterpiece, could easily be reduced to rubble in moments. Admire it, but don't stand in its shadow, he warns. Wars? There will be wars and rumors of war, but don't worry, those things are just the beginning! There will be earthquakes and famine and all sorts of horrors to follow. Thanks, Jesus?

On Thursday, most of us will gather around tables that are groaning with food—an homage to our ancestors who worked and lived off the land and celebrated a bountiful harvest. Thanksgiving is intended as a day for all of us to pause, reflect on our blessings, and give thanks to God for all that is good and true in our lives. Matthew's Jesus concurs. Mark's Jesus says, "Wait a minute."

Mark's Jesus knows that on Thursday, not all of us will dine at a bountiful table with family and friends. Some of us may eat alone. Many of our neighbors to the east have homes that are empty, gutted of everything, drying out from the floods which Hurricane Florence brought their way. Neighbors further south in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia will have a difficult time locating the spot where their homes once stood. The fury of Hurricane Michael pushed some houses hundreds of yards away while completely blowing other homes into splinters. Our neighbors to the west will have nothing more than a pile of ash and twisted metal to visit on Thursday while still searching for hundreds of family members who are missing from the inferno of wildfires that swept through parts of California. In Florida and Pennsylvania, Texas and California, as well as every other state in the nation, there will be empty seats at many tables due to gun violence. It sounds like Jesus' words are coming true, doesn't? As he warns, the trouble is just beginning.

How do we deal with these two versions of Jesus? Do we cling to the Jesus who says, "Don't worry, God's got your back." or to the Jesus who tells us, "Hang on! Its going to get a lot worse!"? On this coming Thursday, or any day for that matter, can we offer thanks? Like our parents—like many of

us—Jesus was a realist, telling us that the world is wonderful and full of everything we will need for life, but we had better be careful and wise and trust God.

The good news is that imbedded in Jesus' dire warnings is a hint, actually a bold prophesy, that we can easily overlook or misinterpret. We often miss it, at least we men do. Perhaps you ladies caught it the first time through. As he warned his disciples that life can turn on a dime and all kinds of terrible things can happen, Jesus said, "This is but the beginning of the birthpangs" (Mark 13:8).

I hear those words and I think, "Oh, no! This is not going to be good! There is going to be pain and trauma and all kinds of horror coming our way." I may not know much, but I do know that birthpangs are not pleasant. Yet, what do birthpangs signal? The birth of a child—something good and creative and hopeful. Certainly birth involves pain and discomfort and risk, but hopefully the outcome is good, great even!

Could it be that in Jesus' dire-sounding statement about what the future holds there is also the promise of things that are immensely good? I think so. One truth of the Gospel is that God is still birthing our world, still creating wonder and goodness, and still doing new things, better things, good things.

Mennonite pastor Brad Roth reminds us to look at what is happening in the world through eyes other than our own.¹ Devastation and loss by hurricane, flood, fire, war, and other causes are horrific. God surely grieves along with us. What is it that people always tell us after a tragedy or disaster? What is it that some of us know first hand? Things are not most important. Things can be replaced. Life and how we live it are of ultimate value.

When the disciples admired the huge columns of the temple and marveled at the engineering, artistry, and craftsmanship that went into it, Jesus reminded them that buildings and other things are not permanent. The temple and anything around us can be reduced to a pile of rubble in a moment. Yet there are other things that really matter. There are other things that last forever.

¹Brad Roth, "Reflections on the Lectionary: November 18, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time," *The Christian Century* (October 24, 2018), 21.

The letter to the Hebrews encourages us: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

On Monday of last week, as people in Eastern North Carolina were working to rebuild their homes damaged by flood, as people in Florida were clearing away debris and making plans to start over, as people in California searched for loved ones, as Jews and Palestinians fought in the Middle East, as Britain and the European Union worked through a bitter divorce, as our nation battled over vote counts in Florida and struggled over health care, immigration, and a host of other issues, while it rained in Rocky Mount, it snowed in New York City. Our daughter Catherine shared with us the experience one of her friends had on the subway during the snowfall. Listen to her story:

Subways during the snow are a terrible mess and everything on Monday was delayed and rerouted. My friend had waited over 30 minutes for a train and finally was getting on one that she thought was the right one. A guy behind her snapped at her to move toward the center and they ended up getting in a heated argument. It happened again as the man kept snapping at people to move and he and my friend ended up saying some rather sharp and colorful words to one another. After stewing silently for a few minutes, my friend felt terrible that she had gotten into a fight with a stranger and tapped him on the shoulder to apologize.

He had just been texting his boyfriend, saying how silly and awful he felt for yelling at a stranger and being so rude. They ended up shaking hands, exchanging information, and agreeing to spread kindness and patience.

This incident is a sweet reminder that we should not be stubborn, that we should take a minute to be calm, and when we realize that maybe we have hurt someone or taken out our own

frustration on someone else that they probably did the same to us. Maybe then everyone can share a little cheer!²

Upon reading Catherine's story, Deborah added one of the precepts from the book *Wonder*, "If you have a choice of being right or being kind . . . always choose kind."³

In a world like ours, in a day and time like ours, for what can we give thanks? Kindness. God is kind—abundantly, amazingly, generously kind. God has given us the beauty of an amazing world that is ours to use and enjoy as long as we do not abuse and waste it. God has given us one another to enjoy and share this world. Granted each of us has the capacity for cruelty, but above all we have an immense capacity for kindness. The good news is that in the midst of all of the bad news, the hateful actions, the disturbing attitudes, and the destruction that happen around and to us, God is still birthing his community in our midst. It is a community of kindness in which we provoke one another to love and good deeds. Today, on Thanksgiving Day, and every other day, let us offer our gratitude for the things that remain and, out of what is painful, let us birth kindness. Amen.

²Catherine Grace Wright, "Reflections on a Subway Ride in Snow," (November 16, 2018).

³R.J. Palacio, *Wonder* (New York.: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

November 18, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

With all of the sorrow and fear which have gripped our nation and world in recent days, we find ourselves anxious and distracted, O God. It becomes easy for us to dwell on the troubles around and within us, rather than being mindful of the variety and abundance of your gifts to us. But we come to worship this day and in this season with hearts overflowing with gratitude because of all of the goodness with which you have filled our lives. In the past week alone, we have enjoyed the support and companionship of family and friends; an excess of food and comforts; the satisfaction of meaningful work as well as time for rest and play; the freedom to make choices and express our opinions; opportunities to worship, to reflect, to enjoy things of beauty; and countless other blessings which enrich our days but which often pass us by unnoticed and unappreciated. Trusting in your grace to sustain us through every circumstance, may we offer all that we have and all that we are each day of our lives, both in grateful response for your generosity and in humble acknowledgment that every moment we enjoy is a gift from you.

Because we have known such goodness from your generous hand, O God, we bring our prayers before you with confidence that you will hear us and respond. For those who are sick, we pray for your healing. For those who mourn or are lonely, we pray for your comfort. For those whose lives are disrupted by violence, we pray for your peace. We pray especially for those whose lives are torn apart by terrorism or war or wherever political or ethnic unrest threatens human life. We pray for those in our own nation who face devastation because of natural disasters or human tragedies. We pray for hope for those who live in poverty and fear in our own city. Guide us to be a people of compassion and to respond to these needs out of our own abundance. Teach us to be merciful because we have been shown great mercy. Help us to live as shining examples of your goodness and grace because it is your light which fills and guides us. Grant us wisdom and courage to follow your call wherever it may lead. May we join all creation in raising our hearts and voices in joyful songs of thanksgiving to you, O God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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