

Advent 2, Year B
December 4, 2011, St. John's Sharon
Is 40:1-11; Ps85; 2 Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8
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Guiding Principles

A story is told that Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol, a holy and generous man, lay fearful on his deathbed. His students couldn't figure out why he was afraid. He said to them, "When I die and go to the world to come, they will not ask me, Zusya, why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Zusya, why were you not Zusya?"

We are in Advent. We are waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus. We are waiting for his coming again in the stable in Bethlehem. We are waiting for his coming more deeply in our hearts and lives. We are for his coming at the last day. We recognize this expectation in our liturgy by changing colors and by creating a more contemplative feel. Advent waiting involves making room so that Jesus has space to come into the stables of our hearts and lives when he appears.

Another important part of Advent, however, is figuring out what we are supposed to do while we wait. Over the past two weeks we've looked at caring for the least of our brothers and sisters so that we can care for Jesus, as well as how to be doorkeepers for Jesus as we go about our holiday affairs. The homiletical homework, however, is to apply these instructions in our own specific circumstances, because God has made each of us unique. We are not Moses. We are not Rabbi Zusya. Only one of us is Randy and only one of us is Adam. But each and every one of us has a particular way to live God's work of love.

Peter's second letter says it this way: "What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?" This question is not only for us as individuals, but also for us as a community here at St. John's. What kind of persons are we supposed to be, gathering in this beautiful, hundred-year old church, surrounded by a community that isn't the same as it used to be, as we wait for and hasten the coming of the day of God? All churches aren't created the same. As individuals we aren't all going to be held accountable at the last day for not leading the children of Israel through the Red Sea like Moses, or not leading a Rabbinic school like Zusya, or not building a swimming pool like Reverend Owen, or not starting a free golf course like the Buhls, and I'm pretty sure when we die and gather together under the heavenly St. John's banner, God isn't going to ask us, "Why didn't your powerpoint slides have better graphics?" or "Why didn't your tent revivals save Sharon?" or "Why was your preacher so lazy that he almost never preached for 45 minutes on Sunday morning?" No, instead, we will be held accountable for those gifts and qualities that God has given to us in particular ways to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God in this place.

Now for those of you keeping score at home, you probably noticed that the umbrella strategy we have developed over the past year is in your bulletins this week. You might also note that at the ten o'clock service we have begun singing a setting of the purpose statement at the offertory. This purpose statement is the broad way we are expressing what God made this congregation for:

To Worship God, Care for People and Grow as Christians. We also have spent the time to discern an answer to “What sort of persons ought we do be as we wait for the day of God?” The answer is our six guiding principles, and I want to talk a bit about them today.

The guiding principles describe how we act when we are at our best. One way of describing them might be the “St. John’s way” of doing things. These principles describe qualities of holiness and godliness that an outsider would recognize in our common life when we are doing our work the way God created us to do it.

As we talk about our guiding principles, they should be qualities that you recognize for two reasons. First, because they describe the work that has been going on in this parish for many years. These guiding principles are our guiding principles and don’t come out of some Episcopal edict or church growth booklet as things we ought to do. Instead, they describe what we have been doing, at least what we have been doing on those frequent occasions that we can feel God’s Spirit in what we are doing. Second, you should recognize them because they came out of your input. Your descriptions of who we are is where the team that wrote these down got them.

Our first guiding principle is that we ask for God’s guidance and power to do the work he has given us to do. The importance of a church asking for God to show us the way and to provide the means seems like a no-brainer. This principle has been lived into in various ways. As an Episcopal church this prayer has often happened individually, as people get on their knees at home, or in else in formal liturgical prayers. Few people have traditionally been ready to get up and pray extemporaneously before a meeting or ask a bunch of people to sit in silence, quaker-style, until God gives guidance. But we as a congregation value prayer as part of what we do. Last year, for example, the ECW wrote a prayer to use at their meetings. I’ve also heard people in the parish remark, after something hasn’t gone as well as it could have, “Well, we didn’t really pray about whether this was what we were supposed to do.” When we are doing our best work it will be what God’s wants us to do in the power of God’s Spirit, and we will be doing it that way because we have prayed somehow about and for the effort.

Our second guiding principle is that we undertake activities to develop loving relationships among all people. When we gather to do something at St. John’s, we expect to love each other more when we are done. Most of us probably don’t think about that explicitly when we set out to do something. We’re not thinking, “Gee, I’m going to come and help with the altar guild cleaning for Christmas so that at the end Pat Gross and I have a more loving relationship.” But we would be disappointed if when we worked together on something we didn’t feel more like a loving family, if our relationships weren’t stronger, and if we didn’t get closer in some small way to somebody. We’re not a place that’s so focused on meeting some goal that we would allow people to be trampled along the way, and on the rare occasions something happens that doesn’t build up our common love, we know it’s not right. The principle also says we develop loving relationships among **all** people. We aren’t only focused on young people, or on long-time members, or on the choir, or on the women’s group, or on newcomers, or on the vestry, or whoever, but we believe we are growing the love among all of God’s children that show up at anything we are involved in.

Our third principle is that we are hospitable and welcoming, inviting newcomers and strangers to join us. I saw a wonderful example of this a few weeks ago. One of our youth brought a friend to church with him on a Sunday that he was an acolyte. He came up before the service and asked if his friend could be an acolyte, too. So we put a robe on him and gave him enough instruction not to hurt himself or trip over the bells, and everything worked well. I've heard similar stories from people in ministries today because some friend invited them to help out decades ago, before they were even members. ECS is another great example of how newcomers and strangers are welcomed, not only as clients, but also as volunteers a variety of capacities. When our life together is vibrant and thriving, we have always made space for people to come along beside us in welcoming and hospitable ways.

Our fourth guiding principle is that we do what we do well for the glory of God. Look around this sanctuary, and you'll see multiple examples of how people have done things the right way. We try to do our worship with excellence. People come for miles to buy our cookies at 3C's. Our Chinese Auction two years ago brought people from other Chinese Auctions held in the area that day because they were so impressed by it. The members of this church will take the time, do the work, and spend the energy to do something right, and that spirit of excellence matters and is appreciated. But we also aren't just doing it for ourselves or to raise a few more dollars or whatever. We do what we do well so that God is glorified and so that through our good work, people are brought closer to an experience of God.

Our fifth guiding principle is that we enjoy our work together and have fun doing it. Bob King wrote a neat reflection in the newsletter about joy, and that sense of joy pervades St. John's when we are at our best. Natural Church Development has done research that shows that one of the best indicators of love in a church is the presence of laughter, and this church can just enjoy being together at a level that is not always present in other churches. I think it's fun to be here, and the joy people have in being together, whether at a Mad Hatter Tea Party or during coffee hour, or even at a vestry meeting, can be contagious. The more we appreciate and nurture that sense of joy and fun, the more attractive we are to other people, as well.

Finally, our sixth guiding principle is that we engage the wider community in the work we do. Almost nothing here happens with only the St. John's parish in view. We hope and expect people from the wider community to come for our events, to join us for worship, and to be part of our activities. Sometimes we need to be more intentional about how we engage the community, or learn more effective methods, but from at least the time we opened a swimming pool to everyone in the valley that wanted to learn to swim, or when we invited all those shipping out to fight in World War II to dance in our gym, we have attempted to engage the wider community in what we do.

I believe, brothers and sisters, that these principles will be the yardstick we are measured by when our Advent hopes are fulfilled and we meet the Risen Lord Jesus. Starting at the beginning of the New Year, we will be sharing some tools so that all of us, each in our own areas of work in the church, will be able to think about ways we can live more fully into who we are at St. John's when we are at our best.

We aren't going to be asked how well we were Moses, or Zusya, or Grace Chapel, St. Joe's or Cedar Avenue Church of God. We will be asked how well we were St. John's, and we will be asked because God has created us to be such an amazing, loving, joyful, powerful household of God that we dare not settle for anything less.