

**The Sunday Missive – November 12, 2023**  
**The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Hymn 620 Jerusalem, my happy home**

Jerusalem, my happy home, when shall I come to thee?  
When shall my sorrows have an end; thy joys when shall I see?

Thy saints are crowned with glory great; they see God face to face;  
They triumph still, they still rejoice in that most happy place.

There David stands with harp in hand as master of the choir:  
Ten thousand times would one be blest who might this music hear.

Our Lady sings Magnificat with tune surpassing sweet,  
And blessed martyrs' harmony doth ring in every street.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, God grant that I may see  
Thine endless joy, and of the same partaker ever be!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySssVj7XCs>

**The Collect of the Day**

O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might  
destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and  
heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify  
ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power  
and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and  
glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the  
Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned  
the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and

they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

## **The Psalm -- Amos 5:18-24**

Thus says the Lord\* ***The God of hosts, the Lord:***

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord\* ***Why do you want the day of the Lord?***

It is darkness, not light\* ***As if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear;***

Or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall\* ***And there was bitten by a snake.***

Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light\* ***All gloom with no brightness in it?***

I hate, I despise your festivals, says the Lord\* ***I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.***

You offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings\* ***But I will not accept them;***

The offerings of your fatted animals\* ***I will not look upon.***

Take away from me the noise of your songs\* ***I will not listen to the melody of your harps.***

Instead, let justice roll down like waters\* ***And righteousness like an everflowing stream.***

## **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no

means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

### **LEVAS Hymn 189 Great is thy faithfulness**

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
There is no shadow of turning with thee;  
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not,  
As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided,  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
Join with all nature in manifold witness,  
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzN1VArhECo&t=2s>

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then

all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

### **Yes, We Have a Choice**

We have a choice, says Joshua. His folks and us folks both. Whether it is a choice about what to do unto others, or a choice of how to respond when done unto. The great theologian Karl Rahner asks: "Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven someone even though we got no thanks? Have we ever been absolutely lonely, and tried to love God even though we were no longer borne on the crest of the wave of enthusiastic feeling? Let us search in our life. If we find such experiences, then we have experienced the Spirit.... Here is the experience of eternity." Here indeed are the moments we have chosen to serve goodness – to serve the Lord. We have choices, and when we have fallen into sin and become subject to evil, we can choose to change. To be really sorry for one's errors is to open the door of heaven.

There are specific, discreet, irreversible choices like casting a vote, or jumping into the water, or getting intimate with someone, or getting behind the wheel of a car when you've consumed intoxicants. The result of each momentary choice may be neither wondrously productive nor stunningly destructive. Just as every good choice may not result in a "gift that keeps on giving," ironic or otherwise, every bad choice is not necessarily going to lead to

pain, humiliation and tragedy. On the other hand, we have to keep making our choices forever, so they all matter. With each one, we're either moving toward goodness or away from it.

We are on a continuum of choosing. That is the human condition; that's what the story of us being kicked out of the Garden of Eden means, no matter whom you blame for it; that is our job (or should I say, our Job) description. "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord," declares Joshua. We have all the information we need; this is our future. When Joshua says this, he knows full well that the future is built one choice at a time. So when the people cry, "We too will serve the Lord!" Joshua is a wise enough leader to be sure they understand what this means: it is not a once-for-all declaration, but a convicted intention that might lead to an ongoing pattern of choosing: "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him; so put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord.' You said it, now let's see you do it.

"So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem." He laid out a program for them, with the criteria for following the Lord. It's all well and good to say "I choose." But if how we respond to difficulties, how we treat one another, how we conduct our affairs, how we expend our energies, how we acknowledge our failures, how we spend our money, how we use our imaginations and our senses of humor, how we tell our stories, if how we do all these things bears little discernable resemblance to God's precepts, then we will have to learn to choose a little more frequently, a little more purposefully. "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? Good trees bear good fruit."

There's a discipline involved; our reward is not in arriving at a time of life when we get to stop choosing. It's death that has no sting. Life can sting plenty. But the discipline is in choosing as well as we can without regard for the day or the hour. Don't be fooled by the future tense in the story of the wise and foolish women.

This is a story about making choices today, in this life. It's a story about whether we can accept that our choicemaking determines our character. There are indeed many things we cannot be sure of, but of one power, we can never be deprived: it is the power to say, "As for me, I will serve the Lord." It must have been getting along to wintertime if they needed lamps to go to a wedding. Certainly daylight saving time had ended. Then things were postponed even more and they all fell asleep. Finally, the party got started and the wise ones still had spare lamp oil to get them through the night. The unwise ones had only been thinking short-term, so they lost out.

You might make a case that the wise women were also kinda stingy women, so the power of this particular story seems to reside in the concept of preparedness, rather than communality. Spiritual preparedness, that is, not so much mutual enrichment or care. There will always be some people who can afford more lamp oil, or gasoline, or water than others, but whatever our resources, if we get in the habit, develop the discipline of conserving them for godly purposes, we will have gone a long way to prepare for the days ahead of us, and we will have a shot at being wise.

In the beautiful book *The Wisdom of Solomon*, part of our biblical Apocrypha, Wisdom -- *Sophia* in the Greek -- is treated as a person, a supernal and timeless being who when sought will always respond: "Wisdom is radiant and unfading; she is easily discerned by those who love her, and found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. She graciously appears in the paths of those worthy of her and meets them in every thought."

It's as though we were floating down a river together. Each of us has a different craft, some are in fancy LL Bean canoes, some in beat-up kayaks or dented flatboats. Some ride in patched inner tubes from old truck tires, with their silly long valve stems poking into the fleshy areas of one's lower back. And some of us are just bobbing free, with hands facing down to protect our own fleshy

areas from the sharp rocks on the river bottom. Some of us can provide more, in the way of food and drink and useful equipment than others, some can only lend a smile or a good ghost story or a knack for spotting fauna and flora.

But we are all here together, floating on and in the current together, all headed for the same delta, the same ocean, the same soup eventually. Many of us try paddling upstream, but it wears us out. We try stopping or taking side trips to skip a stretch of the river, but there's a good chance we'll miss some of the best parts when we do. We try distracting ourselves, by being busy or bothered or oblivious, or by attaching ourselves to someone else's boat through dependence or crime. But the losses are mainly ours, and the prices we pay are lives expended between the poles of doubt and despair. We can't skip the journey to the sea, but we can miss it.

Or we can choose to cooperate with the current – loving the trip, even as we look forward to the destination -- stopping to help one another, feed one another, pull one another out of the drink when boats get swamped, pointing out the snags and holes and pillows – going with the flow of the river, even if once in a while someone has to remind us that we're all wet.

In today's psalm, the prophet Amos paints a picture of God's current that might make us want to avoid it entirely. But of course, that is one of the things – the main one – that we have no choice over. No matter what or whom we choose to worship, or how we choose to think, say and do things, the day is coming; the party is on, with or without us. Lots of sound and show will not make up for sincere attempts on our parts to keep awake and choose well. According to Amos, things will not be rosy for those of us who are negligent or arrogant in our approach to the wisdom of preparedness:

“Alas for you; why do you desire the day of the Lord? It will be darkness for you, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or escaped into the house and rested a hand against

the wall, only to have it bitten by a snake. The Lord takes no delight in your solemn assemblies; he despises your festivals. And even though you offer your burnt offerings and grain offerings, God will not accept them. 'Your sacrifices of fatted animals I will not look upon,' says the Lord. 'Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.'

Not that Amos is saying that having parties and making music together is wrong, mind you, or if he is, then it's hard to agree with him; it's just that those are not the activities that will give us a *soubassement* of preparedness. Festivities and joyful liturgies and happy musicmaking surely make life grand; perhaps old Amos was a bit grouchy. But his point is simple and unassailable; it gets at the root of all our Godly choice-making, and reiterates our part of the covenant.

The next verse in Amos' prophecy is, of course the heart. What it means to serve the Lord is simply to go with the flow; keep paddling; be on and in the river: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." One drop, one rivulet, one cascade; one choice at a time.

### **436 Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates**

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates; behold, the King of glory waits!  
The King of kings is drawing near; the Savior of the world is here.

Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple, set apart  
From earthly use for heaven's employ,  
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee: here, Lord, abide!  
Let me thy inner presence feel: thy grace and love in me reveal.

So come, my Sovereign; enter in! Let new and nobler life begin;  
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on, until the glorious crown be won.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eq0ulsNYBgw>

## **I Choose a Pumpkin Life**

If once I chose the rush of spring wind  
or the restless, lapping, push-to-the edge  
of summer waves— I'm older now. I rescind

those choices. Falling leaves tick like time around  
my shoulders—who does not love this slow, bright  
burn of color? I knew before, feel now:

each step I take, I take into a moment  
that will not come again. My garden's  
nearly done: beans are sparse, everything spent

in an effort to love the warm earth and the rain  
whose dark/bright cloud shadows roll over all,  
brief as dreams. Only the pumpkins remain

strong. Those ribbed lanterns holding a stash  
of seed-coins for next year, a promise  
they mean to keep.

Paula Schultz