

Sermon: Looking through a Spiritual Lens
Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-2; Luke 49-56
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Hebrews 12:1-2

Today's New Testament reading comes from Hebrews 12:1-2. These two verses follow the stories of our spiritual forebears in faith: from Abraham and Moses to prophets, martyrs and other Christians' sufferings. As beneficiaries of their sacrifice, let us hear our call to continue in the same faith.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12:49-56

Today's gospel reading comes from Luke chapter 12, verses 49-56. We are continuing Jesus' travel narrative. As Jesus fixes his eyes to Jerusalem and the call to die on the cross, he is sharing stories and views without holding back. Throughout this tense passage, Jesus accentuates the urgency and his humanity in this message, asking all of us to pay close attention and make a hard choice. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

⁴⁹ "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night to grab yourself a drink of water? What starts out as a simple decision to get a drink of water to quench my thirst never turns out as simple as one has in mind. Of course I do not want to turn on the lights as it will bother my beloved, and I do not want to go through a momentary blindness. My brain at half-awake functioning capacity reassures me by saying, ‘Sure, my night vision is much better to navigate myself through the home I walked hundreds, if not thousands of times.’ Lastly, the fear of not able to go back to sleep right away mixed with the confidence in the moment that I will reach my reward without as setbacks, suddenly turns my no-brainer choice into a daring, living version of minesweeper; where one needs to choose and land at the right places to step and turn. The consequences of a wrong place to step or a place to turn ends up with an explosion of pain that one cannot scream for the love of your family members.

By the time I come back to bed after having a glass of water, I am not the same person who left the bed few moments ago. I am back with bumps and bruises, fully awake, pondering why is that door or furniture so much closer than I imagined. And why do I have random items or toys laying around the house?! And as I begin to fall back to sleep, I tell myself, next time I should simply turn on the lights before my next midnight oasis run.

Each of us are presented with choices every day and each decision that we make takes us further from or closer to our goals. Sometimes we can foresee the results of the decision, but most often our hindsight is 20/20, being our greatest teachers of wisdom in our lives. In today’s Luke passage, Jesus speaks of a truth, not afraid to share things like he sees them, asking each of us – are you ready to commit your life as a child of God?

Even though today’s reading might not seem gentle, this is not the first time that Jesus speaks of making a decision that leads to divisions in people’s lives. The one that jumps immediately to my mind is when Jesus calls the first disciples:

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he

called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. –
Matthew 4:18-22

There is a phrase that I learned during many counseling courses & training: every decision means a change. May it be a small or life-altering change, but one never remains the same after making a decision. The commonality between the two passages (Luke and Matthew) is that Jesus is asking people to make a decision that will bring a change in their lives. In a church language, Jesus is asking his people to make a decision that will make them holy – which means to be set apart. One might ask to be set apart *‘from what’*, but I believe the better way to ask is to be set apart *‘for what’*. God is asking us, the children of God, of a holy nation, to be set apart to bring the good news and the gospel of living hope to the ends of the earth. To take on the challenges of the world and overcome it with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.¹ To not see the world through our worldly eyes and the way others may see them, but through God’s eyes. Helen Keller said it best when she said, “the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.” When we decide to commit our lives as a children of God, make a decision to be set apart to do God’s will through our actions, that is when we have the ability to look through our spiritual lens that God has place within each of our hearts: feeling the rising convictions within - with compassion and empathy for the weak, for the righteousness and justice for the voiceless, and camaraderie and boldness with people facing injustice. No longer are we seeing the outer appearance of others around us, but a mirrored image of ourselves; simply another child of God created in God’s image, who is no different than any of us.

In these past few days, members of this congregation have experienced a change in their lives. Through an interaction with one unexpected individual who has walked through our sanctuary doors, we have seen God’s hand at work, that changed of our commitment to prayer and trust in God’s Words, being truly set apart to be used for God’s glory. It does not have to simply end there. How exciting would it be if more of us are committing our lives to be used it that way, changing our own lives first through God’s grace and love and inviting others around us to experience the same loving God? But isn’t it exactly what we are called to be?

This coming Monday is the start of a new school year. Our youth and children will spend majority of their days in an environment either they will be the influencers or followers. As we pray and ask these young individuals to become leaders among their peers, how and in what way should they influence others to be? Are we simply asking them to be modeling good moral characters or are we asking for more than that? Are we not asking that they exemplify Christ-like love towards their peers and are their actions setting them apart from the rest of the student body?

As we look at ourselves and our workplaces, can our co-workers and colleagues see our faith in our actions? By looking through the spiritual lens, are we able to see the needs of others

¹ Fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22

around us? Or are we the one that is restricting the work of the Spirit only in our homes and while in church? As we think deeper about today's passage, is Jesus asking us to be more divisive or having more unified spiritual core that allows us to speak and act upon our faith at all places and all time?

I hate to admit that what Jesus speaks to us through today's message stings much deeper as we talk more about it. Jesus points out at the end of today's Luke passage that we pay more attention to the worldly things than our spiritual things. What am I more devoted to; what do I pay more attention to? Jesus speaks of our ability to pay attention to the things we can see.

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat, and it happens. – Luke 12: 54, 55

Jesus is asking us why we cannot interpret our spiritual things when we can with worldly things! Why are we paying attention to the worldly matters and neglect the spiritual needs of our lives? Friends, what is our faith? Where is our eternal home? Why are we Christians? Isn't our eternal goal the same? To join the voices of angels, praising a new song to our Maker, “glory, glory or hosanna, hosanna” in God's presence?

As my car mysteriously broke down this week, I must admit that I was more afraid of the changes of pace and the rides that I must schedule than maintenance of my spiritual disciplines. As I paid attention to the new school year for Diana and the relief that was coming, I saw my own negligence and missed opportunities to share my faith - her faith - our faith, with my own daughter.

The good news and the joy that is for us is that we will not make a decision and change on our own. We are accompanied by the great cloud of witnesses. Jesus knows that this is only the beginning of a marathon. All we need to do is allow the Holy Spirit to have free reign to lead us. Each time when we are faced with a decision, let us ask Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, for an advice. Amen.