

October 14, 2018  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Columbia Congregational Church  
Psalm 22: 1-5, 10-11; Hebrews 4: 12-16

*Jesus Understands*  
Sermon by the Reverend Betsey Polglase

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, the means of communication was simply by word of mouth, or smoke signal, or drum beat. People learned to tell stories, or used story format to remember the message. Once upon a time....and they lived happily ever after....until the next thing. Much of the Old Testament began in this “oral tradition.” Eventually, human beings learned to put their language down on walls and animal skins and eventually there were letters written. How things were said, particular selections of words was important. Each writer needed to be clear about his message. There was no ability to instantly clarify.

The letters that have been included in Scripture were not intended for self-righteousness or bolstering others opinions of the writer. Far more important, the message was of God’s steadfast love and grace and then the impact of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection on humankind.

This mornings words in the letter to the Hebrews were carefully chosen and sound both severe and comforting. The first two verses speak of the power of the word of God. The words do not rest in the scriptures and eventually become irrelevant, but continue to apply to every generation. The words will pierce us, split us apart, and judge not only our thoughts but also our intentions: what is deep in our hearts. Yet, the second two verses speak of the actions of Jesus, the redeemer and sustainer, who makes it possible for us to come before God in our state of weakness and fallibility and experience God’s love.

There is “tension between God’s word to us and our words to God, between God’s judgment that lays us bare and God’s grace that empowers us to ask help of God in our time of need, and between God’s claim on us and our claim on God by virtue of Christ’s saving work.”<sup>1</sup>

It was important that the readers understand that God not only spoke to the ancestors through the prophets, but also has now spoken to us most clearly through Jesus, who entered into our human condition and thus can truly understand our fears, and struggles, and temptations, and needs.

To whom do we turn when we face some form of trouble? Someone who understands, who has lived our experience in some way. We are drawn together by our common lot: loss of a parent or spouse, struggle with a disease such as cancer and addiction, or experiences in the military, especially if in battle. Not everyone can have our experience, of course. Some can be just really good listeners, friends who will not judge, who will sit with us no matter our troubles, walk with us as we find our way.

The words of God can bring us to our knees before we are lifted up by God’s grace. Perhaps the saving grace, if you will, is that we can be assured that Jesus is right there with us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He is not just our cheerleader or judge, but our companion, reassuring us, giving us strength and endurance as we face our weakness and all that tempts us. He has been there. When we turn to Jesus, we “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”(4:16).

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Burgess, *Theological Perspective*, Feasting on the Word Year B vol 4, 158.

“The God who places us under judgment is the very God who loves us and sympathizes with us in every respect.”<sup>2</sup> God wants to be in relationship with us.

In the UCC we say that God is still speaking. That doesn’t mean that God is rewriting scripture, but that God is with us as we seek application to our current circumstances. God’s word as found in Scripture and as interpreted through Jesus is “God’s eternal sermon”: a message that continues to enlighten us even these almost 2,000 years later.<sup>3</sup> The God and human story continues. God’s word did not stop with the book of Revelation.

When we turn back to the word of God, to scriptures which were written by man but inspired by God and later the actions of Jesus, we hear what God has done, and learn from what Jesus taught. Our own lives and our decisions and actions are put in order and oriented around our loving God.

John Calvin made an analogy between Scripture and eyeglasses. Scripture helps us see the will and grace of God. “Without Scripture, we see only a world in chaos, driven by human ambition and failure.” When we study the living word of God, that is the message of God for all times, not just 2-3-4 thousand years ago, we are able to see more clearly. We see “God’s transforming love which brings good out of evil and hope out of despair.”<sup>4</sup>

I had a conversation with some of my relatives about the various tensions that brought about protests over our lives. None of us remembered

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<sup>2</sup> John P. Burgess, 160

<sup>3</sup> Michael G. Hegeman, *Homiletical Perspective*, Feasting on the Word Year B, vol. 4. 163

<sup>4</sup> Burgess, 160

the suffragette movement, but we referred to that along with the civil rights movement, and the protests against the Vietnam war and the attack on Iraq as well as more recent demonstrations. We talked about how hard it is to be putting your heart and soul in something you believed in and then feel like it made no difference, that you wasted your time. During the following week, as I thought about it, I got to thinking part of the problem is that we are thinking in our time, not God's time. We live in a world of immediate gratification, which perhaps is as much a reflection of the human condition as it is our times. After all the Israelites hadn't planned on wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and they whined and complained and even rebelled against Moses throughout those years. But in the end they came to the Promised Land.

Yet, when we turn to Scripture, we see that was not the end. They had a period of what we might call the good life under king Solomon – which was not good for all the people of course. Then the chosen people saw their city of Jerusalem and the temple built for God destroyed and they were taken off to exile in Babylon...for 50 years, more than most life times in those days. Then they returned and began again.

Please don't misunderstand, I am not saying we should just sit back and let things play out. That is not what Jesus taught his disciples. That is not what Jesus did. Jesus was part of the play and we are part of the play. Jesus stood up to the self-righteous religious authorities and the powerful Roman authorities, and yes he was executed for taking his position. How terrible that was for his followers! Talk about hope being ripped away. And then they encountered the resurrected Jesus.

Through scripture that tells of Jesus' self-giving, we are freed from our own worldly torment, and called into relationship with God. Jesus has

experienced the human condition and through his death and resurrection has given us access to “hope, [ ], wisdom, power, and mercy.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us pray

Dear Lord, our burdens are lightened as we are reminded in Scripture that Jesus, who faced many struggles as we do, has opened the door for us to come boldly before you to receive your mercy and grace as we face the course of our daily lives. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Hegeman, 163