

## **“In or Out of this World?”**

Las Cruces, we have a problem.

Apollo 13 was on its way to the moon in April, 1970, when an oxygen tank exploded, preventing a lunar landing and requiring a complicated series of engineering fixes just to keep the astronauts alive and get them safely back to earth. Perhaps you saw the 1995 movie which dramatized those events. Tom Hanks spoke a rather famous line, “Houston, we have a problem” and I borrowed that line to start my sermon.

Given Apollo 13’s problem, you might be thinking that I know something is wrong with the building’s safety, and you should be scrambling for the doors. But that is not the case. So, what is the problem?

Possibly it would be more accurate to say that I have a problem. I suspect at least some of you might have a similar problem. The rest of you are stuck listening to me for the next ten minutes, so in some way, my problem is also your problem. Let me explain.

As I understand it, a sermon should relate the Bible to the issues we as Christians face today and inspire listeners to go back out into the world with renewed vigor for doing God’s work. IF that is NOT what First Presbyterian of Las Cruces wants in a sermon, we should ask our search committees to communicate what we want to candidates early on.

In the meantime, for me the problem is that I sometimes struggle to understand what the holy book means in the context of our lives here and now. Thus, I am not sure I can adequately fulfill the aforementioned purpose of a sermon. I suppose I could have avoided this problem by ignoring the lectionary and instead selecting different passages that are easy to understand, but I feel that would be cowardly, dishonest, not at all in keeping with what God wants and not what you all deserve. I could have declined the invitation to preach, but if everybody said “no” anytime a proposed task was difficult, little of worth would be accomplished. So, I gotta try. You can judge if I succeed in illuminating God’s will for us here in Las Cruces.

Let’s dive into the lectionary passages set for today, and I’ll explain what I learned from preparing this sermon. Just in case you are asked to preach sometime this year, know that Reverend Nick pulled together some wonderful resources to help those of us who didn’t go to seminary, resources which informed what I am about to say. And Janet gave me lots of good advice. I hope I demonstrate that it is possible for a lay person like you or me to understand God’s way well enough to help others also understand.

We’ll start with the gospel passage from Matthew. Jesus uses the analogies of Salt and Light to illustrate what he expects from his followers. This church clearly comprehends Christ’s meaning, as demonstrated by the after-school ministry called Salt and Light. Like the small amount of salt needed to bring out the flavor of food, like a fire on a hilltop that signals its location for miles around, Christians can have an effect on the world around them. Salt dissolves in liquid and thereby can spread its effect into a larger surrounding substance. Similarly, the effect of even a small candle flame spreads out, and a modern LED bulb

spreads its light even further. Jesus tell us that although we might be small and ordinary, we can and should improve and enrich the communities in which we live.

From one of Reverend Nick's resources I learned that Jesus used the plural form of you – like the southern expression “you’ll” – and thus Jesus focused on the power of the collective. As a congregation working together, we can do more good than any efforts we make as individuals. As one preacher wrote:

*In these tense times when it seems there is so much that wants to pull people apart, when there are competing visions and desires for what our communities and our country want to be, the light of Christ evident through the church is especially important. We can disagree about political and social issues, but ultimately it is the truth of the cross that illuminates our lives. Jesus draws us together, pulls us into a forgiving and cleansing center, telling us that we aren't just a bunch of “yous,” but one great big y'all. Jesus reminds us that there is something in our witness that can shine, that we exist as that one community in the world which by its very presence reminds the world that God loves it, cares for it, has died for it so that it may truly live.*

Okay, salt and light makes sense, not a problem. But then we come to the part about the law and the prophets, and most specifically, that last verse: <sup>20</sup>*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

How do we make sense of what Jesus says about the importance of the law and the prophets for us as Christians today? IF we interpret verse 20 one way, we might be tempted to conclude that we need to follow the letter of the law in order to be saved. But then we would be guilty of taking it out of context, of ignoring other sayings of Jesus.

I have benefited immensely from the listening prayer sessions led by Mary Maley here on Thursday afternoons. Each week we focus on a scripture passage chosen by whoever is preaching the upcoming Sunday, and we hear it read from three different versions or translations. The paraphrase provided in The Message by Eugene Peterson helped me understand what Jesus said about the Old Testament. According to Peterson, Jesus said: *Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures – either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after the stars burn out and earth wears out, God's law will be alive and working. Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will have only trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom.*”

Jesus mentioned the Pharisees not as examples to follow; they interpreted scripture by their own human wisdom. The Pharisees and Scribes were self-righteous, but in truth were far from what God wanted.

The meditation I read aloud earlier from Psalms says that people who focus on helping others will themselves be blessed by God. I did not include in our worship service the lectionary reading from Isaiah, one of those prophets Jesus mentioned that he came to fulfill. In that Old Testament passage, God lists what he considers to be righteous behavior. Whereas the Jewish people of that time chose to focus their religious practice on ritual and fasting, God wanted them instead, *“to loose the bonds of injustice... let the oppressed go free...share your bread with the hungry, help the homeless, provide clothing for those without”*.

In our modern times, we can do some of those same things, but let's make sure we do them for the right reasons. Not to make ourselves feel good. “Look at me, I'm such a good person” I hope that we realize being righteous is not just doing the right thing. Being in a right relationship with God and with neighbors involves what is sometimes called “emotional intelligence”. We need to understand others well enough to connect and act in pursuit of a common good. To understand others, we need to listen more than we speak. To understand God, we need to open our minds and our hearts to hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Which leads us to the passage from First Corinthians. God's wisdom is not of this world. This world won't understand God's way on their own; the Spirit guides us to demonstrate God's way to others and make it accessible.

Generous sharing of time, effort, money, and material goods may not seem wise to humans, but God understands better than us what is best for us. God offers forgiveness, the opportunity to repent from selfish behavior and replace that with a focus on what is really important, really beneficial: Love your God with all that you have, and love your neighbor as yourself, just as God has loved us.

Without God's vision and help, we humans would not know how to enter the kingdom of heaven **or** how to truly enjoy God's blessings here on earth. It's not our righteousness that shines—it's God's righteousness (and love and grace) which shines through us if we let it.

The following story illustrates a least a little of God's wisdom. A rabbi was walking with some of his disciples when one of them asked: “Rabbi, when should a man repent?” The rabbi quickly replied: “On the last day of your life.” The disciple protested “ But we can never be sure which day will be the last day of our life.” The rabbi smiled and said, “The answer to that problem is very simple. Repent now.”

God asks us to be in the world but not the same as the world. We don't have to go to outer space, we don't have to understand everything that happens. We need to listen for the Spirit's guidance, and we need to live out God's intention that we spread his light, his love, the hope he provides.

Y'all have a blessed day and be a blessing to others.