

## “IN A MANNER WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL”

a sermon on Exodus 16:2-15, Philippians 1:21-30, and Matthew 20:1-16  
September 24, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller  
Sumner, Mississippi

Let me begin this morning by bringing you into my sermon development process. In a perfect world, I would be working several weeks ahead of the “next sermon” due to be preached. And there are certainly times when I do that. When we are approaching Advent or Lent, in particular, I tend to look at the whole season as a sort of “unit,” and hope to write sermons that develop some kind of theme.

But regardless, when it comes to some specific *week*’s preparations, whenever I get to it, I begin by simply *reading* the full set of lectionary readings, in order. And I say to myself, what is the common *thread*, here.

Sometimes, the thread is easy and obvious. Again, particularly around the major festivals, the texts not only have common threads, but they also have movement and *development* from week to week as we “journey” through the season.

Those are the weeks when my preaching task is the easiest.

The next part of the process is stepping back from the text, and reflecting about what has been going on in the world that is impacting our lives right now – realities within the life of the congregation or its community, or from beyond.

Again, sometimes there are immediate obvious *connections* that make the sermon begin to flow, and speak. Other times, well, not so much. And then, of course, I study words, read commentaries, and go where all of that leads me.

With that process in mind, let’s walk together through this morning’s texts, which I will admit to you I have found rather challenging to face.

We begin our journey in the desert. The people of Israel have just been *miraculously* freed from their bondage, only to find themselves in a place where (unlike in Egypt) their most *basic* needs are not being met. They fear for their lives, and they “complain against” their leaders. Sounds pretty “ungrateful,” with which I struggled at first. But after some study, I have concluded that this is another case when I’m not overly fond of the New Revised Standard’s translation. There is a challenging Hebrew word, “Lun” in the verse that is variously translated

– depending on the context – as “to tarry,” “to lodge” (as in, spend the night), but also “murmur” or “grumble.”

The word has to do with what you do in the late of the night – in good times, it refers to where you *sleep*. But at other times, it has more to do with what you “whisper” about with others around the waning campfire, or what you lay awake worrying about, what you *murmur* under your breath.

The word “complain” used in the NRSV sounds like some kind of an “open challenge,” as though the Israelites are speaking with one voice and organizing a *coup*, or something. That really isn’t it at all.

They were *deeply concerned*. Maybe in those murmurings they were beginning to place some *blame* on their leaders, in whom, after all, they were placing their trust, and literally their *lives*. But that is only natural. Not knowing where your next drink of water or your next meal was coming from would be a cause of concern for *any* reasonable person.

The resolution of the Exodus passage, of course, is that God once again *hears* the cries of the people, and provides for them in the desert (miraculously) – water from a rock, bread from heaven, quails falling from the sky. For the next forty years, in fact, God provided for them while they “wandered” in a basically uninhabitable land.

Let’s move on to Philippians. One of the apostle’s *last* letters to be written, it was essentially a “thank you note,” written from his prison cell in Rome, to his good friends in Philippi – who continued to be supportive of him both spiritually and *physically* – sending him resources to sustain him in that challenging environment where he was unable to see to his own needs.

Again, it was late in Paul’s life. He undoubtedly suffered from the aches and pains that we all experience as we age. He certainly understood that most of his earthly life was behind him, and so even in the midst of persecution, he was able to give thanks, and be hopeful, and *exhort* the Philippians – who were themselves suffering at the hand of people he called their “opponents,” to nevertheless “live . . . in a manner worthy of the Gospel.”

The Gospel lesson is one of Jesus’ more challenging parables. It is about “day laborers” working for the usual daily wage – enough to survive another day, but not much more – and how the laborers who arrived early and worked all day felt a (very *natural*) sense of resentment when they learned that those who arrived *late* in the day received the very same wage – for much less *work*.

The landowner essentially *chastises* them for being “envious” of his “generosity.” But at the end of the day, *all* the laborers have received enough to be sustained – regardless of their “worthiness.”

So the “guiding theme,” if you will, is clearly about God’s providential care. God provides. Sometimes *miraculously*, sometimes through the generosity of friends, or even “earthly systems,” and the *kingdom of heaven*, Jesus said, is *like that* – not about rewarding us on the basis of what we have earned, but receiving what we need, learning to be grateful, and to live, thereby, “in a manner worthy of the Gospel.”

Now then, on to the part about “stepping back from the text, and reflecting about what has been going on the world that is impacting our lives right now . . .” There are numerous new and growing “humanitarian crises” in the Caribbean. There are now literally *millions* of people without life’s basic necessities, without power, clean water, and food – not to mention those still digging out from the wrath of prior hurricanes. And as if that weren’t enough, a huge earthquake rocked heavily populated Mexico City and its surrounding area this past week. Millions more in peril.

And those are just the *natural* disasters and in *our* part of the world.

We could just shut ourselves off from all of that, I suppose. Here at home, it’s been a pretty typical late summer in Mississippi week – a little hot and muggy, but bearable. Gas prices are up a bit, but unless we have been in a time of “personal trial,” we don’t have much to “murmur” about.

But of course, we absolutely *cannot* do that – shut ourselves off from a world around us that is in *incredible* pain and anguish. We have to keep our perspective about it – keep tending to our daily tasks, making our livings, raising our families, celebrating occasions (as we have been doing in our household this weekend – with grandchildren in tow for a grandson’s birthday).

But at the same time, we need to be *fervently* in prayer for our brothers and sisters in peril, who have lost everything – including in many cases, loved ones – who are surely on the verge of hopelessness. And we have to figure out, in this particular circumstance in which we find ourselves, what it means to “live . . . in a manner worthy of the Gospel.”

I know the obvious ways. We all do. Pray, of course. And be generous. We who are able to do so, need to *give*. And we are. And we will continue to be in the days and months ahead. Those who can should be organizing to assist in other ways. And they are. Work teams, and relocation services, and supply lines, and all

the rest. It will take a while. These have been truly unprecedented storms and levels of destruction.

The really challenging part, given the enormity of what has happened, is remaining *hopeful*, in the midst of grief and loss. That's nothing new. It happens all the time in life – whenever we lose someone or *something* we love, or that is important to us.

So, how would you apply the lessons of today's texts to *your* life? We have to be honest. While “miracles happen” in the world, manna no longer falls from heaven. That was a one-time miracle. God is surely at work. But God works through us.

So for what do we pray? And where do we focus our generosity and efforts? These are challenging times. We haven't even *mentioned* world tensions and other global issues – the North Korean problem, the Middle East, debates raging on about the extent to which climate change has exacerbated the effects of the recent storms (and what to do about it).

In short, we really *do* have a lot to be worry and murmur about!

To *that*, at least, I think there is a clear Biblical answer. Lying awake, murmuring, *complaining*, and the like, are *not* the answer. Either God is the Creator and Sustainer, and is “in control” of the world, and we can be at peace, or God is not. And the Scriptural witness, as well as the witness and experience of people of faith all through the ages, has been that God *is* in control, and therefore we can be grateful for life even in the very midst of death, for growth and progress even at a time when we have experienced setbacks and massive destruction.

As time goes on, our responses will take shape, the course of events on the world stage will play out, and we will all continue to do what God's people have always tried to do – live as ones who know God's Love and Grace, and “in a manner worthy of the Gospel,” proclaiming the Good News others in word and deed.

May God be with us in that endeavor. And to God be the glory. Amen.