

"Sifted In Preparation"

Isaiah 30:19-29; Luke 22:31-37; Revelation 2:12-17

I would like us to consider a certain portion of the text of *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, also known as *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. This famous song was written by Julia Ward Howe early in the Civil War. I want us to consider the portion of the 3rd stanza which reads, "He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat; O be swift my soul, be jubilant, my feet! Our God is marching on." Remember now that the Civil War involved a deeply divided nation. Remember also that Gods, in instances too many for us to know, has used war and societal dysfunction to chastise a people and to induce them to return to God in repentance and changed perspective. Howe's song is a testimony to the belief that God uses a variety of means by which he seeks to draw people back to himself. Thus, via what has also been termed as the "UnCivil War", God was using those terrible circumstances to "sift" the hearts of our nation's citizens. It was a reminder that we all will stand before the judgment seat of God. The next phrase is as poignant as it is brief: "O be swift my soul..." In other words, do not tarry or delay. Understand lastly, that this "sifting" was done purposefully by God for God's own ultimate purposes. The sifting indicated reflects an inner assessment of what one stands for and what motivates one's heart and life.

In my preparation this morning I saw a connection between the sifting God was doing during the infamous American Civil War with what seems reflected in our OT lesson. "He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction." The sifting sifts out good intentions and actions from the bad, the right from the wrong. It all is rooted in what resides within the human heart. The nation of Israel would go through the crucible of conquest, first by the Assyrians (722 B.C.) and then Judah by the Babylonians (587 B.C.). These 2 events would sift out the true believers in the LORD from those who gave lip service. But even in this OT prophecy of the disaster to come, it just as importantly noted that the day of restoration would come, whereupon the people of God, with new found sight, would take those man made idols, which they formerly crafted with great care and loved to worship and adore, would despoil them and throw them utterly away. Then "you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel." (Isaiah 30:29, NIV)

This framework is precisely found in our Gospel lesson. Jesus told Peter of his "sifting" that would come during the days of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, but furthermore foretold of the truth that Peter would come back in a greater understanding of God's mercy and forgiveness, and when that took place, for Peter to "strengthen" his brothers with that good news. There is a divine purpose in the sifting we're talking about.

Let me continue with a question. What would it be like if instead of envisioning us going to Bethlehem where Jesus was born on Christmas morning, rather, we would envision Jesus sending us a message saying he was coming to our house that specific morning. What preparations would we then make?

This past week I was on tap to lead the Bible study portion of youth group. I decided to use the "tool" we know as the flour sifter as a guide in our Advent

spiritual assessment effort. I decided it was probably a good thing to introduce the young people, if they hadn't ever heard of it, to one important aspect of the season of Advent - self assessment and reflection. First, I asked them to name the various things they, or any of us, do to get ready for Christmas Day, especially when company is coming. What preparations are typically made? The first and predominant response was, "Clean the house." I asked them to consider that at Christmas we typically envision "us" going to the manger scene in Bethlehem to see and worship the Baby Jesus. I asked them to consider something of the opposite. What would it be like, what preparations would we make, if we knew that Jesus was coming to visit us? Our house! Not surprising, again, the first and predominant response was, "Clean the house." I found their response not only amusing but delightfully truthful! I then asked them to consider what "preparations" we would make in terms of our spiritual house? That question, understandably, took more time to assess. I asked them if they have had any negative feelings or emotions towards others, such as anger, bitterness, jealousy, and the like. Being a bit more specific, I asked them if they had any of these negative feelings or emotions towards their teachers, school mates, or family members? I was sure to tell them I did not want them to respond or answer out loud, but only in their minds. Heads shook the non-verbal affirmative. The point here is that I asked them to do something of this kind of inner assessment. To ramp it up a notch I asked them to consider what their effort would be like if Jesus told them that, beginning now, he was going to have a video recording of their lives, between at moment and Christmas morn with which to assess their preparations.

I figured their imaginations would be captured by a particular mental image. I asked them if they had ever come across a bag or box of flour that was infested with bugs of one sort or another. Their quizzical facial expressions reflected a response that they had not. At seminary there was a small housing complex called Potterfeld which featured a small room where donated nonperishables were stored for free distribution to all seminary families who wished to share in the donated items. Long story short, anything of the flour or cracker type of food product was in danger of bug infestation. Not all packaging is "bug" proof. We were warned to look carefully at everything we obtained there, and before we took the food items into our homes, lest we get an infestation in our homes. This warning was not unwarranted. It was fun to see the kids' faces as they envisioned the days of yesteryear when, as we heard in our Advent Candle reading, the flour sifter was used, in part, to sift out unwanted things such as "pieces of husks, seeds, and other debris, including *bugs*."

Thus, the flour sifter is simply the next "tool" used as a metaphor for our Advent journey's look within. I think it is worth noting that while we typically think of the flour sifter as a "kitchen utensil" it actually is in fact a tool, a thing by which we construct various food items such as cakes and breads. One thing interesting about bread, cakes, and flour is that every part of the construction process will have some impact on the finished product, for good or for ill. Life, therefore, might be likened unto a fine loaf of bread or a delicious cake of one sort or

another. It is precisely the same for the spiritual life we live. The "tools" we use to construct it will impact the final product.

As it is with the kids with whom I conversed the other day, so it is with us. Life has its ups and downs, its struggles and disasters. It is very easy for nasty teachers, friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, and fellow church members to cause us to want to be uncharitable, testy, nasty, and even vengeful. But again, what preparations would we make if Jesus came to OUR house this coming Christmas morning? The Gospel leads us in a certain direction while the world and its inhabitants keep shoving us in the opposite direction.

A footnote in my Bible (referencing Isaiah 30:20) reads, "the LORD gave his people the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, but he promised to be with them, teach them, and guide them during hard times. God expects a lot from us, and many times following him can be painful; but he always acts out of his love for us." As I considered this quote I realized that it was directly related and appropriate to our Gospel and Epistle lessons. In terms of Revelation, Jesus was telling the churches the things for which he was commending them, but he also wasn't slack or remiss in reminding them where they had gone terribly wrong. A loving father or mother should always be quick to offer words of encouragement and commendation. But a truly loving father or mother would not carelessly overlook or dismiss those things that are terribly wrong. Minor things are more easily overlooked, but major things will always be disastrous.

It was in direct relation to the difficulties and struggles the people of God faced that the LORD God of Israel offered the words of encouragement we find in our OT lesson. If we would have continued reading further in our passage from Isaiah we would have learned more about the justice that would be meted out to Israel's enemies. The nations that were the enemies of Israel would one day be shaken through the sieve of judgment. Isaiah's message told of the day, after Israel herself had been shaken through the sieve of judgment through exile, when she would once again hear the voice of God saying, "This is the way. Walk in it." It is important to remember that one of the biggest reasons Israel herself would suffer judgment was because the people had forsaken the worship of Yahweh for the construction and worship of other idols, idols of the peoples in whose midst they lived, idols of wood overlaid with silver and gold. After these days of judgment the people will once again walk in the right way. "Then you will defile [the idols you crafted with your own hands and used to worship] your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, 'Away with you!'" The ultimate point here was that their present day of apostasy wouldn't last forever and that, in due time, they would turn back to the LORD in faithfulness. The book of Revelation is all about a word of encouragement for the people of God to hold firm, and avoid or come back from apostasy. Let us remember that this is precisely a key part of what Advent is all about.

As noted before, we must remember that the 7 letters to the 7 churches offer specific reasons for commendation as well as warning against specific failures. I was surprised to find this dual-emphasis framework in our Gospel lesson. Jesus is warning his preeminent and most outspoken disciple, Peter,

that Satan had asked to sift him as one does wheat, to shake him up and see what he was made of! But Peter was not without remedy and help from above. Jesus prayed for him that his faith, ultimately, might not fail.

But wait! Wasn't Peter the one who would deny Jesus 3 times before the rooster crowed? Yes, of course he did. But a key point here must not be missed. It is suggested here that Peter's failure was not, actually, a failure of his faith in Jesus, but, rather, failure in his ability to live up to the high standard to which the Christian is called. The final sentence of verse 32 is critical here. "And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." This is precisely the message from Isaiah. "After your exile," says the LORD, "you will turn back (after your time of failure) and walk in the true way, My way, and destroy and throw away the horrible idols you used to worship!" I wonder it would have been more clear for us if Jesus would have added a few words which would flesh out what was inferred. Thus the full meaning might be stated, "And when you, Peter, have turned back after having turned away from me those 3 times, those 3 times you denied me, strengthen your brothers." Jesus was acknowledging that he knew Peter would deny him. He foretold it here. But Jesus also knew that Peter would ultimately come back, understanding that Jesus had not only predicted his denial but that he was in fact forgiven even before it happened. Thus with this assurance and confidence in the love and forgiveness of Jesus, Peter was to thus encourage the other disciples, all of which had also abandoned Jesus. Scholars I think debate whether Peter's failure was a failure of faith or a failure of practice. The two are related but not identical.

Our Epistle lesson tells us that the church at Pergamum was commended for their having not renounced their faith in Jesus. We must bear in mind that the visions of Revelation were given in a time and era of increasing persecution somewhere in the vicinity of 100 or 110 A.D.

One of the things for which I think we here in this church might be commended is our commitment to the fullest truth of the Gospel as best we can ascertain and hold on to it. The world in which we live tries in various ways to assure us that we need not be so certain that Jesus is the only way to heaven. The world is increasingly bold in their belief that everybody will make it to heaven. The world uses various means by which to tell us we needn't be so uptight about various life practices, things that related to morality and immorality. The greater part of being Christian, we are often urged to consider, is to be less dogmatic and certain about theological truth claims and moral practices and by simply being more nice to others. Be more inclusive and understanding, that is the main thing.

This is of course partially true, but therein lies the danger. The Christian faith as a whole, and the church as its central agent, does need to be very caring, nice, and understanding, but that cannot include the caving into things God has forbidden to not only Christians but to the world.

The sexual immorality condemned in the letter to the church in Pergamum involved a few applications that are foreign to us, such as temple prostitution. That is not an issue for us so we need not elaborate on that. However, also included are those things we would typically understand as sexual immorality;

thus there is no need to elaborate on these either. The single point here is to stand firm against those kinds of things God has condemned and to not let the culture in which we live wear us down and weaken our faith according to what God has revealed to us. What we believe guides and controls what we do.

This point is made in this 3rd letter through a metaphor this is typically baffling to modern Christians, particularly those who have little or knowledge of "Balaam" and "those who hold to the teachings of Balaam." In essence, this was in reference to those who participated in, or who were directly and negatively affected by, cultural activities and practices that were in defiance of God's ordinances. These were cultural practices that, while seemingly innocuous, actually were detrimental to either the truths of the faith God has given us or in terms of life practices we are led to believe are ok and appropriate.

In our day and age it is often the cultural mantra that in order to obtain justice one must seek vengeance against an offender. A natural impulse of the broken world of sin in which we live tells us to hate and undermine someone who has offended us and not let go until such time as justice, on our terms, is rendered. Sometimes we do this internally rather than externally. I asked the young people if they have ever had a teacher who had belittled them or been unkind to either them or to a friend. I got nods of affirmation. I asked what were their negative responses. Anger, bitterness, retribution? And you know, these things can continue to live and dwell within us whether we let them be worked out externally. These are the sorts of things we want to sift out of our hearts, our spirits, our souls, our lives.

The 7 letters to the 7 churches were, to use our present metaphor, meant to sift the hearts of the Christians and the churches which they inhabited. The letters also pointed to the sifting that would take place at the end of the age, and the particular measurements by which the sifting would sort out the sheep from the goats. Revelation was meant not only as a letter of preparation for the churches in the vicinity of 100 A.D. but for the church of any and every age thereafter. Thus, it is appropriate for us to be both encouraged and challenged this Advent season. May the Holy Spirit be with each one of us as we sift our lives, sorting out the bugs from the flour. Amen.