

“Think on These Things”
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

It’s funny how the Holy Spirit works. 9 times out of 10, I preach on the Gospel. And there are fewer things I like preaching on more than the parables of Jesus. Wrestling with them until I get a blessing that I can share with you is one of my favorite tasks as a preacher. And today’s parable is definitely one that requires wrestling. But that’s not where the Holy Spirit led me.

On the few occasions that I don’t preach on the Gospel, I usually choose the lesson from the Hebrew Scripture. We didn’t hear that one today but it’s from Exodus and is a story I’m guessing many of you are familiar with – where the Hebrew people grow tired of waiting for Moses to come down from Mt. Sinai where he’s been talking with God. So they ask Aaron to make them a god like the gods the Egyptians had back when they were enslaved there. Aaron has them bring all the jewelry they had taken from the Egyptians before their journey through the Red Sea and into the wilderness, melts it all down, and casts it into the form of a golden calf. God gets very angry and tells Moses he’s going to destroy the people, Moses argues on their behalf, and God listens.

It’s a familiar story, but one so rich with messages for us, especially as we spend time in the wilderness of the pandemic, struggling with our own doubts and fears and tempted to lose hope and turn to sources other than God for strength and comfort.

I had really planned to preach on that story. In order to shorten our services to keep them as safe as possible, we have eliminated one of our readings, and so the preacher gets to pick whether we will hear a lesson from the Hebrew scriptures or from the Epistles each Sunday. Last weekend I needed to decide which lesson to put in the bulletin. Even though I knew I wanted to preach on Exodus, I chose the reading from Philippians.

Funny how the Holy Spirit works. Yesterday I realized that what we need more than wrestling with banquet parables or stories of golden calves is to listen to Paul's words to the people in Philippi.

“Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Listen again, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, think about these things.” Take a moment and breathe.

Over the next week, I encourage you to meditate on this passage. Write the lines out. Pray with them. Think or journal about how you could follow them and what obstacles get in your way. Discuss them with friends and family. Limit your news intake because there is a good chance that what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable will be hard to find on any of the news channels.

One of the things I've found most difficult about this time, especially as we approach the election is keeping myself focused on soul-nurturing activities.

It's so much easier to get caught up in the negative and to dwell there and then head down the road to despair.

Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

But how, Rev. Lauren, you might be asking.

How do we rejoice in this chaotic, crazy, frightening time?

How can we rejoice when we watch our country divided as though we were headed for another Civil War?

How can we rejoice when we see so much violence?

How can we rejoice when we watch fires destroying parts of our country and hurricane after hurricane attacking our coasts?

How can we rejoice when we watch our loved ones dying, whether from COVID or something else?

How can we rejoice when we have to choose between our health and the health of our loved ones and our jobs and businesses?

How can we rejoice when our kids can't go to school and we're required to spend yet another hour in front of a screen?

How can we rejoice in this time? How?

In his remarks to the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church on Friday, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, "There's light all around, do not let the darkness deceive you into thinking it is more powerful than it is. It is not."¹

¹ ++Michael Curry, <https://mailchi.mp/episcopalchurch/episcopal-church-executive-council-opening-remarks-from-the-presiding-bishop?e=1f3db7de0e>

It's easy to let the darkness deceive us. It's hard to rejoice when we don't see the light. And that's where Paul's words are so helpful. If we spend our time thinking on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, and so forth, we will see more light. When we rejoice in the Lord and turn all our worries over to God, then the despair will not overwhelm us.

It's a discipline to be sure, but now is the time to step up to the challenge.

How, you say? Here are some ways.

For every minute or hour we spend watching news or scrolling through social media, we can spend an equal amount of time praying in whatever way helps us center and reconnect with God.

For every negative comment or event we hear about, we can look for the balancing good deed.

When we encounter someone who thinks differently from us and we catch the anger building up inside and start thinking about all the things we want to say to that person, we can stop and challenge ourselves to think of what we value about that person. If we can't think of something, we can ask God to soften and open our hearts.

We can begin and end our days with prayer, being sure to practice gratitude. And we can commit to doing at least one act of kindness every day.

In her song, *Lean In Toward the Light*, Carrie Newcomer sings,

The shadows of this world will say,
There's no hope why try anyway?
But every kindness large or slight,
Shifts the balance toward the light.

As Christians, we KNOW that there is hope. The darkness appeared to overcome Jesus on the cross, but death could not defeat him, and he rose again. As

Christians, we follow the one who did not let hate or fear or anger overcome him. He faced them with love, forgiveness, and grace.

These are the things to think on. The darkness wants us to despair. The devil wants us to give up hope. The powers and principalities want us to stay small and asleep.

But every kindness large or slight shifts the balance toward the light. And when we shift our thinking from dwelling on all that's wrong in the world, to those things that are true, honorable, just, and pure, we will receive what Paul promises, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding."