

A Sunday Devotional for People and Families at Home
The First Church of Evans
Sunday, June 28, 2020

Greetings from Jerusalem Corners,

A week ago Thursday evening, the Church Council voted to resume public worship services in sanctuaries on our property on Sunday, July 5th, Founder's Sunday. We will be in touch with you by letter and phone as to how we will organize Sunday worship to be both safe and rewarding to those who join us. We are well aware that many of you will not be able to attend Sunday services for reasons of health and circumstance, and we will continue to provide you the means to join us at worship from home. It will be a joyful thing to see many of you, but we will need to be in prayer both for those who come and those who cannot so that we continue to worship as one family going forward.

Call to Worship

Isaiah 44:6-8

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, who is LORD of the armies:

"I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare it and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I do not know any."

An Opening Prayer

Almighty Father,

You have built your Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. Please forgive us our sins and grant that we would be joined together as one family, your children and disciples, united in spirit by the truth they taught and the way of life they walked before us; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Devotional

Isaiah 44:24-26

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb:

"I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.

I frustrate the signs of liars and make fools of fortune tellers.

I turn wise men back and make their knowledge foolish.

I confirm the word of my Servant and fulfill the counsel of my messengers.

I say of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah,

'They shall be built and I will raise up their ruins'..."

Forty-eight years ago this last week, I gave my life to Christ as a teenager at an ice cream counter in my hometown. And in the years since I have read some portion of the Bible almost every single day. I have come to love the words of Scripture, first, because it is all about God. The Bible allows me to see God as he really is and he is nothing like the God I would have imagined left to my own devices. And, second, I love the words of Scripture because God gave them to us inspired through the hearts and minds of men and women who had to wrestle their way through the darkness and folly of their own hearts and the world around them toward the perfect love and holiness that lives in God's heart. These people knew the pain and failure that I know and they still believed and I love them for it.

Isaiah the Prophet lived in an era when most of God's people had lost their way. Their society had fallen into chaos and folly and the visions Isaiah saw and the teaching he offered were given to God's people as a huge Assyrian army swept into the Holy Land, killing thousands of God's people and taking thousands more of them into slavery far from home. And the first thing God wanted his people to know was that, in all that chaos, he was still sovereign:

"I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself."

The Israelites weren't in trouble because God had lost control of the situation. They were in trouble because they had despised God's commandments and begun to dabble in the occult. *"I frustrate the signs of liars and make fools of fortune tellers."* Even today in a modern, materialistic society, there are lots of people who seek comfort and guidance and even entertainment from that place beyond the veil where spirits and demons live. In the ancient world, spiritualism and idol worship were rampant. Everywhere but Israel, people consulted spirits and practiced the magic arts and, by Isaiah's day, God's people were joining in, having their fortunes told and celebrating what they learned at wild, orgiastic banquets where the commandments of Israel's God were broken by the handful.

The result was a jaded, decadent view of life where people who saw themselves as educated sophisticates talked themselves out of the holiness and selflessness God had taught Israel in the wilderness. After all, God's people lived in mansions and palaces now. They no longer needed manna from heaven and water from stones. What God had commanded them to be as men and women, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and neighbors no longer seemed to apply. It seemed kinder and fairer to them to let each person do and be what suited their fancy. But God begged to differ: *"I turn wise men back and make their knowledge foolish,"* God told them.

It has always, ever, been like this. Since we left the Garden, God has always, ever, offered love and forgiveness and power to change to those people who are willing to let him be God. And it has always, ever, been difficult for us to accept his offer, because there is a part of us that wants to think that we are smart enough to make our own rules, wise enough to rule the world according to our own fancies. But the people who wrote the Bible had learned better from God.

And God has always, ever, vindicated the words he inspired his prophets to teach: *"I confirm the word of my Servant and fulfill the counsel of my messengers."* What God teaches in his Word imposes a heavenly severity on us all. He commands us to be honest with people and faithful to covenants and sincere of heart and obedient to him. But the severity he commands has always, ever, been motivated by love. Even at their worst, God promises to keep faith with his wayward people in Isaiah's day: *"I say of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built and I will raise up their ruins'..."* It follows that, even when we are in deep trouble, God will continue to love us, if we will only believe his promises, and turn from our sins, and let him be God.

Offering Acts 20:35 *"...remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

Thank you for the faithfulness you have shown Christ and his kingdom during this season. Please mail what your heart leads you to give to: The First Church of Evans, Attn: Cindy Fanara, P.O. Box 364, Derby, NY, 14047.

(What follows is the script for the worship video we will offer this week via a link on our website:

TheFirstChurchofEvans.com. If you cannot access the video, you can still join us by reading and praying and singing through the printed Order of Worship that follows.)

Greeting and Prayer

Hymn

"The Church's One Foundation"

See Insert

Table Talk

Jude 1-4

Elder and Properties Chair, Carl Mende

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write you about our common salvation,

I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith

that was once for all delivered to the saints.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

In our Scripture Lesson today, from one of the last books in the New Testament, we see Jude, the brother of James and half-brother to Jesus, writing a letter to a church in turmoil. We see that *"certain people"* had *"crept in unnoticed"* into the church; who, pretending to be godly people, were actually teaching a false gospel. Jude wrote this letter with the purpose of maintaining the purity and truth of the Christian faith. For this reason, in the greeting of his letter, Jude introduces himself as the *"servant"*, or it can also be translated, *"bondservant"* or *"slave"* of Christ. It is interesting that Jude, as well as James his brother, both start their letters by identifying themselves as bondservants or slaves of Jesus. They were half-brothers to Jesus, but both of them considered the blood of the cross more important than the family blood that related them to Jesus.

Jude then addresses his letter to *"the called"*. We see that this was written to Christians about issues they needed to hear. Jude emphasizes three things, first, that his readers were called by God, second, that they were *"beloved"* by God, other translations say *"sanctified by God."* That is that they were set apart from the world by God. Third, they are *"kept for Jesus Christ,"* in other words Jesus Christ was their guardian and protector.

With this backdrop in mind, Jude begins his letter wanting to write the early Christians about their *"common salvation."* He wanted to get across to them the sense that we are all saved in *"common."* To be a Christian is to be part of a community. God doesn't have one way for the rich and another way for the poor, one way for the good and another way for the bad. We all come to God in the same way. That was what Jude had wanted to write about, but he found that there was a great need in the church that he had to address.

So Jude went on to appeal to the church to *"contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."* The emphasis here is on a fixed core of truths known as *"the faith."* So what we see there is that there is a concept of *"the faith"*, which are the things that we actually believe, not just a feeling of faith but the actual doctrines we believe. We are told to contend for it, fight for it. The Greek verb translated *"contend"* has the sense of continuous, on-going action. It has the sense of *"to contend strenuously in the defense of."* This is not like a physical fight, but rather it means that we are to choose *"the faith"* and defend the truth without compromise.

Jude tells us that it is *"once for all delivered to the saints."* It cannot be changed, it cannot be altered, its foundational truths are non-negotiable. Our job is to preserve and defend those truths. There is no sense in saying, "I am a Christian, but I won't take a stand on what the Bible actually says." We can't have two minds, saying one thing with our mouths and another with how we live our actual lives.

If Jesus is true, if as Jesus says in John 14:6: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"*, then there is salvation in no one else. If no one can come to the Father except through Christ, then we really want to make sure that people know who Jesus is and how they can come to God through Him. There isn't anything more important than that; it is of supreme importance. In Acts 4, verses 11 and 12, the Apostle Peter stood up in front of the leaders of that day and said, *"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you the builders, which has become the chief cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."*

There is only one way to God and that way is Jesus. Too often people in the world think that Christians are rude or bigoted or intolerant or unkind, and sometimes we give them reason to think that. But when we are at our best, nothing could be further from the truth. In our best moments, we defend the truth out of love, love for God and love for people who need to know the truth. If we must disagree with the thoughts and doctrines of others, it is because we believe that religion without Christ doesn't work.

If we are shown a path that does not lead to Christ as he actually appears in the gospels, a way of life that will lead people away from the Father and toward condemnation, then out of love, not hatred, out of compassion, not intolerance, it falls to us to "*contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*" We live in a world full of wrong turns, dead ends, and highways to hell. And God put us here to love people and to point them toward Jesus, that Savior who alone is "*the way, the truth, and the life.*"

Prayer *Matthew 7:7* "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."

Please keep the governing authorities in prayer that they make wise decisions in response to the pandemic and to the recent racial conflict and civil unrest. Please keep our medical people and other first line public servants and their families in prayer as they selflessly face danger to save the lives of sick and vulnerable people. Please remember our elderly loved ones who are at home or in care facilities. Please especially remember those people and families who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Please also pray for John Vernon who is critically ill, and Jean Hill who this week underwent a procedure, also Richard Pearson who remains in the hospital and Jerry Galfo as he recovers at home from surgery.

Hymn

"May the Mind of Christ, My Savior"

See Insert

An Ancient Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you his peace." We hope we will see you, soon and very soon. Until then...