

Rev. Bill Gaskill

Elmer Presbyterian Church

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, September 1, 2024

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

Sermon: Practical Matters

With deep love and affection I call my wife Jean a lunar-tic. She adores seeing the moon and keeps track of its every phase. And she is precise too. If I say, "Hey honey, look at the full moon," she will promptly correct me: "That's not full; it was full last night at 11:07." To which I say, "Sorry," while thinking, "Close enough; it looks full to me."

There's a lot of lunacy about our beloved little satellite. There are not only full moons. Some are waxing, some are waning, and sometimes it is eclipsed by a larger body's shadows. There are blood moons, blue moons, flower moons, strawberry moons, harvest moons, wolf moons, even worm moons.

Spiritual observances such as Passover must be observed on a very specific full moon. On and on it goes. I think my hair is on fire. It all surely makes my head hurt. I've slowly learned to keep most of my lunar observations under wraps. I suspect most of you are thinking, "This preacher has quickly moved from the sublime to the ridiculous. Why didn't I stay home today? I didn't come here to hear a sermon about the moon." Okay, I agree (not about the staying home part); let's get serious here. I didn't come here to preach about the moon. I want to talk about Jesus.

When James wrote, "Every generous act of giving, every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change," he was speaking into a cultural and religious context that, it turns out, was not that much different from our contemporary situation. That world was populated by all sorts of capricious gods that had no qualms about messing with humans if they took the mood. Today we don't call them gods; we call them politicians. We're more interested in the stock market and who's on Facebook than the movement of stars and planets.

James, like all the writers of the New Testament, wants to divert our attention from conditions in the world with all its chaos and corruption and

direct our focus squarely upon our God who does not change, the one God known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in One and One in three.

Back then, people were stargazers. They invested the natural world with all sorts of superstition about gods and goddesses. Gods had to be appeased. Sacrifices had to be made. Worshippers of the vicious god Moloch went so far as to make fiery offerings of their infant children.

Not all were so demonically motivated. Some were just keen observers of the created order. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, Paul wrote in Romans that looking closely at creation can lead us to believe in God. But he also warned those who failed to see the glory of God in creation would be without excuse for their unbelief when God comes to judge the world with justice and truth.

Wise men who were really astrologer/astronomers were close observers of the night skies, tracking the movement of constellations, stars, and planets. When our most familiar and famous Magi saw a new, and what they interpreted to be a natal star, they traveled far to see, worship, and give gifts to what they believed was surely a newborn king. In hindsight we know they were right. Bringing worship and offerings was certainly the appropriate response to what God was doing through the infant Jesus.

To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. So spoke the preacher in Ecclesiastes 3. And the changes we live through are relentless. Not all of them are good. Israel endured the treachery of Pharaoh, invasions by many people bent on their destruction, periods of exile and even holocausts. Sometimes God disciplined them through world events, God sent prophets to warn them and to chastise them for their idolatry and faithlessness. But God never stopped loving them. He sent deliverance. God's pattern was established in the world: it was and still is death and resurrection.

And God will never stop loving us either. When we look at our world today, there have been many changes that were necessary and good. But don't the times seem foreboding to you. They do to me. There is so much division, so much rancor, and so many roots of bitterness in so many hearts, roots that threaten to rise up and defile many. The threats of humankind's mutually assured destruction and all the talk about being on the brink of WWIII bring not comfort but anxiety. We need what the writer to the Hebrews called "a sure and certain hope that is a steadfast anchor for our souls." (Hebrews 6:19)

The good news is that none of this chaos and corruption will last. Jesus is Lord over and above and under and within all things. In the end, only faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love. Over against this ever-changing world we live in, the biblical revelation of God is that God does not change.

God's steadfast love endures forever. In just one Psalm, #136, all 26 verses include the refrain, "His steadfast love endures forever." The rest of the Psalter uses the phrase repeatedly. The entire canon of scripture is full of assurances of the sovereignty and unchangeableness and the faithfulness of God.

The love of God is solid and certain and is perfected through the offering of Jesus Christ for the sins of the whole world. God's Word stands forever. God's promises are true and sure. Jesus is the Rock of our salvation; his banner over us is love. When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

In Jesus Christ, the perfect has come, and we are invited to live and move and have our being in him as he pours the love of God into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the first gift of God's generosity that has no superior and no equal. And that generosity spills over into our hearts with saving power.

The Spirit cries out from deep in our hearts, "Abba, Father," bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of the Living God. This conviction and revelation knowledge is our certain and sure defense against fear, worry, anxiety, frantic and fretful living as we try to hold back the night. No matter how much garbage is thrown our way by the media and the wicked who seek to overwhelm and control us, God is our strong tower and sure defense.

Make no mistake, there is a battle going on for our very souls. It has always been so from The Garden of Eden to The Garden of Gethsemane and beyond. And sometimes life gets hard, harder than we expect, even harder than we think we can endure. In those seasons, there is also divine purpose, even if we can't figure out why. Usually we can't fathom the reasons for our trials and it's a waste of time to try. What we should do instead is seek the presence of God in the midst of them.

A few months after I retired in the Fall of 2019, I took a serious tumble and injured my back. Things got worse and worse, and I was in so much pain that I couldn't lie down. I spent about six weeks that winter trying to sleep in a chair in our living room. I could only manage short naps. The old

grandfather clock behind me marked off the long nights in 15-minute increments. Every once in a while my granddaughter's cat would stroll by and shoot me a disinterested glance.

So for comfort, I started listening to Gregorian chants on my little Bose player. Most of the chants were in Latin of which I have no knowledge, but I could sense the loving devotion of the monks who were singing. But there was one phrase in English that became important to me and still is. It goes like this: "Save us Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we are asleep; that we may watch with Christ and rest peacefully. But no, wait; did they say watch with Christ or walk with Christ? Recently I even saw it rendered in a manual for prayer as being, "that we may wake with Christ and rest peacefully." Well, which is it. Then, not long ago, it hit me in the middle of the night; it's all three. We are to wake, watch, and walk with Christ in that order.

Until we meet Christ, in our natural condition, we live in a state of spiritual slumber. We need someone or something to wake us up. Probably the most important wakeup call is the conviction of our sin. Without that we try to convince ourselves that we are basically without need of a Savior. We hide out among our excuses and our attempts at self-justification. In mercy God comes to convict us so that we may discover God's amazing grace.

Along with that work of God's spirit, we may wake up due to suffering, the death of someone we love, or even an experience of such beauty that we connect with the deep longing for God that has been there ever since we were born, though we might not have known it.

All people have a hunger for transcendence. Every religion in the world is about a search for God. The beautiful thing about our Christian faith is that the story begins with God's search for us. Save us Lord while we are awake; protect us while we are asleep, that we may wake with Christ and rest peacefully.

After our awakening, the next thing we must learn is to watch. But our watching is not a passive activity like our lobotomized TV habit. Watching with Christ is the exercise of vigilance. In Gethsemane Jesus told his disciples to watch while he went a distance away from them to pray. Watch and pray that you might not enter into temptation. We know that our adversary the devil is on the prowl, seeking someone to devour. We are not ignorant of Satan's designs upon us, using all forms of pride and egotism to divide and conquer us. He wants above all to damage our trust in Christ and sow strife among Christ's followers. One of the most important gifts of

the Spirit is discernment of spirits, the ability to quickly recognize the lies and temptations that come our way.

Jesus interrupted his prayers to check on them: “Could you not watch with me for one hour? The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” It happened not just once but three times in a row.

Before we get too self-righteous, did you ever try to concentrate and pray for one whole hour. It’s not that easy. Our minds race over the fence to jobs we have facing us or something we want to eat for dinner or something we want to buy. Save us Lord while we are awake; protect us while we are asleep, that we may watch with Christ and rest peacefully.

And finally, our faith in Christ involves, not just thinking the right thoughts, believing the right doctrines, though that is important, but it involves a walk that lasts a lifetime. After we wake up to the presence of Christ, we spend a season getting to know him and his ways. How does he live? What things does he deem to be important? We learn the sound of his voice within us then learn to trust his guidance. Like Janet and Dwayne’s daughter Sarah on the Camino de Santiago, we walk and walk and keep on walking with Christ.

I recently read a book by John Mark Comer entitled *Practicing the Way*: subtitled: *Be With Jesus, Become Like Him, Do As He Did*. His recommendation was that instead of calling ourselves disciples we should adopt the term apprentices. As we wake and watch it is with an eye to doing all that Christ commands.

My grandson Jackson is working as an electrician’s helper. He hopes soon to be accepted by the union into the apprentice program where he can graduate from being a step-and-fetch it to one who is learning the actual skills of an electrician. There are no shortcuts. He has to walk the walk with those who know what they are doing.

It is just like that with us and Jesus Christ. James put it this way; listen to it again:

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. James 1:22-25.

Save us Lord while we are awake; protect us while we are asleep, that we may walk with Christ and rest peacefully. Wake, watch, and walk; then rest in the finished work of Christ. It is finished! May the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.