

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the twenty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.ⁱⁱ

“... Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD. I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; Which think to cause my people to forget my name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbour, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal [BUH-awl]. The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD. Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour. Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD.

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

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“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The gods of the ancient world were essentially local deities. Their power extended to certain geographic areas but was limited beyond such boundaries as the city walls or the branches of a certain sacred tree. The more powerful gods ruled over large areas, or perhaps over certain aspects of life, such as war or agriculture. But if you wanted to escape the influence of a particular god, you could do it by moving to a location where some other god held the franchise, so to speak.

One of the reasons the Jews turned to the worship of various nature gods known as Baals [**BALES**] is that they were the gods of Canaan [**KAY-nunn**], the land the Jews had invaded. God told Joshua to kill all the inhabitants of the conquered Canaanite [**KAY-nunn-ight**] cities in order to avoid what actually happened. What actually happened is that the Jews disobeyed, lived side by side with the Canaanites [**KAY-nunn-ights**], and in many cases intermarried with them, and eventually adopted their religion. They seemed to think that the God who had

brought them out of Egypt was the god of the desert and His influence in Canaan [**KAY-nunn**] was negligible at best.

The prophets of Israel eventually managed to convince people that the conquest of Canaan [**KAY-nunn**] meant that the God who had led the Jews in the desert had overcome and defeated the Baals [**BALES**] and was now the supreme God in what we now call The Holy Land.

But later, when the Babylonians conquered Israel and took the people back to Babylon with them as captives, there were prophets who seemed to think that the Babylonian gods had defeated the God of Israel and, since they were now living in Babylon, they should worship and serve the gods of Babylon.

That is the background of the opening verses of today's Old Testament lesson: ““Am I a God at hand [which is to say in Jerusalem] and not afar off [that is, in Babylon]? Can any hide himself in secret places that I cannot see him?’ Saith [**SETH**] the Lord. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’”

““I have heard what the prophets said that prophesy lies in my name, saying I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophecy lies ... which think to cause my people to forget my name ... as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal [**BALE**].””

The institution of prophecy is common to all religions, and there are false prophets in all of them. The true prophets tend to be independent of the religious, political, and social establishment.

In the Bible, Nathan confronted King David face to face and condemned his adultery with Bathsheba. Amos and Micah challenged the sacrificial system as practiced by the priestly elite and the hypocrisy that accompanied it. Elijah took on the prophets of Baal [**BALE**] who were supported by Jezebel and King Ahab. He had to flee for his life.

Jeremiah told the king and the people that an alliance with Egypt was not going to save them from the Babylonian conquest.

But it is common for false prophets to tell the rulers and the people what they want to hear. So it was that the Jewish prophets in Babylon told the people that they should adopt the ways and the religion of the Babylonians. They claimed that God had revealed that to them in their dreams.

But God was in Babylon with His people. He protected Daniel other faithful followers who refused to submit to the demands of the king and his gods, and God's jealousy burned hot against the false prophets who counseled submission to the gods of the land.

“Am I a God at hand and not afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places that I cannot see him?’ Saith [SETH] the Lord. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ Saith [SETH] the Lord.”

It is still common in our day to believe that God can be confined. As long as we are in church, we can praise God and we can talk about Him and we can articulate our faith. But when we leave this place, we enter the territory of another god whose name is Mammon.

Mammon rules the business world. Mammon rules academia. Mammon rules the world of politics. Mammon even rules science and the healing professions. But God will not accept being confined and fenced off from those areas of life.

“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?” says the psalmist. “Or wither shall I go from thy presence?”

If I climb up into heaven, thou art there; if I go down to hell thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there also shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Peradventure the darkness shall cover me, then shall my night be turned to day.

Yea the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day. The darkness and light to thee are both alike.”

Jonah thought that he could escape from the mission to which God had called him by fleeing to another country. It didn't work, and it will not work.

God is by no means confined to this building. He is with you wherever you go. He sees what you do and hears what you say and reads what you are thinking in the workplace, in social gatherings, and when you are alone. God is with you when you travel. No matter where you go you can depend on Him to be with you.

But can God depend on you? Can He depend on you to honor Him, and testify of His glory, and obey His commandments, wherever you are? Can He depend on you to stand up to authority as the true prophets of Israel did, and as Jesus Himself did, even if it costs you what it cost them? If not, then there's not really much point in being here.

The will of God is the same everywhere. The laws of God are the same every where. The presence of God is everywhere.

“Am I a God at hand and not afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places that I cannot see him?” Saith [SETH] the Lord. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ Saith [SETH] the Lord.”

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 23: 23-32 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 7: 13-14, 21-29 (KJV).*