

## SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER

The Fifth Sunday after Easter,  
commonly called Rogation Sunday<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,<sup>2</sup> Supply Priest

### Lessons:<sup>3</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of the fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.<sup>4</sup>

“All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers. And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live. Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years. Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee. Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him. For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses,

and dwelt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God.”

*Or,*

Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the tenth Chapter of the fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup>

“And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good? Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the LORD’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no

So small groups of Christians are now gathering in counter-cultural cells for prayer, Bible study, and mutual support. New statements of faith are being formulated. Official pronouncements are being ignored as the emerging Church struggles to reclaim her own Christ-given agenda. And what is that agenda?

Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” That’s our agenda. That’s our business.

And there’s just one more thing before I stop. A promise accompanies that order from our Lord, and the promise is this: “*I am with you always, to the close of the age.*”

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Orange, Virginia

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Holy Communion for Proper 15B according to the lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 37 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (CIPBC 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 8:1-end (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 10:12—11:1 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 63:7-end (KJV).

<sup>7</sup> St. John 6:47-69 (KJV).

more stiffnecked. For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name. He is thy praise, and he is thy God, that hath done for thee these great and terrible things, which thine eyes have seen. Thy fathers went down into Egypt with threescore and ten persons; and now the LORD thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude.

“Therefore thou shalt love the LORD thy God, and keep his charge, and his statutes, and his judgments, and his commandments, always.”

*Or,*

Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the sixty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>6</sup>

“I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses. For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.

“But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, Moses, and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with the shepherd of his flock? where is he that put his holy Spirit within him? That led them by the right hand of Moses with his glori-

ous arm, dividing the water before them, to make himself an everlasting name? That led them through the deep, as an horse in the wilderness, that they should not stumble? As a beast goeth down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD caused him to rest: so didst thou lead thy people, to make thyself a glorious name.

“Look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation of thy holiness and of thy glory: where is thy zeal and thy strength, the sounding of thy bowels and of thy mercies toward me? are they restrained? Doubtless thou art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O LORD, art our father, our redeemer; thy name is from everlasting.

“O LORD, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear? Return for thy servants’ sake, the tribes of thine inheritance. The people of thy holiness have possessed it but a little while: our adversaries have trodden down thy sanctuary. We are thine: thou never barest rule over them; they were not called by thy name.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.<sup>7</sup>

“... Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eter-

So Peter has really phrased the question properly, and it is a rhetorical question. His question is not “*Where shall we go?*” but “*To whom shall we go?*” And he answers his own question when he continues, “*You have the words of eternal life.*”

The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century declared that the Church exists where the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered. In other words, it is *what* happens, and not *where* it happens, that defines the true Church, and it is in that true Church that the real Christ is to be found.

And there we have it. If we are to be faithful, we must go where Jesus is. The real Jesus. Not the phony smiling anti-Christ who pats everyone on the head and tells them that God loves them just the way they are, but the strong demanding Master who confronts evil wherever He sees it, whether in the practices of powerful religious leaders, or in the systems and laws that oppress the poor, or in the deep recesses of the hearts of His followers. That Jesus is to be found wherever the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered.

For too long, the denominations I have described—the old “mainline” Protestant bodies and The Episcopal Church under the old leadership structure—have preached whatever gospel the shifting tides of cultural fashion have called for. For too long, these churches have allowed the world to pose the questions and define the issues. The issues that are today tearing apart the Church are not issues that grow out of the faith tradition of the Church itself. The ordination of women, the ordination of gays, the use of inclusive language for God including alternative baptismal formulas and blessings, gay marriages, abortion rights—these are power issues brought into the Church by the late-20th Century emphasis on individual rights. They do not belong on the Church’s agenda.

of the old order mingle with the birth pangs of the new as old leadership struggles to retain its power. These are apocalyptic times.

But the new structures are not finished and the new Anglican churches that are springing up are few in number and hard to find. The independent churches require you to trade in your liturgy and your music and your sophisticated theology for simplistic music and messages full of emotion and lacking in depth.

You can always stay where you are of course, and I suspect that most of us will do that. There are many things that tie us to this place, and as long as we continue to hear the Apostolic faith preached from this pulpit and we can do that as long as we are caught up in the ancient liturgy of the Church, and as long as Jesus is presented as He presents Himself and not as many with less-than-robust faith present Him.

But I must caution you to be very careful not to confuse loyalty to Christ with loyalty to any particular place. The true heirs of Abraham's faith must recognize that they, like him, are strangers and pilgrims with no permanent home in this world. Those who believe in the Ascension of the risen Christ must recognize that He is no longer confined to any particular place.

When the Jews became too attached to their glorious Temple, God took it away from them, sent them into a foreign land, and forced them to learn to worship Him there. When the Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people should worship,*" Jesus replied, "*The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.*"

nal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum [*kah-PURR-nay-umm*]. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

"From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Gospel: "*To whom shall we go?*" In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Homily:

That is the question that confronts many people in “mainstream” Protestant denominations today, including those within The Episcopal Church. For various reasons, people are leaving the church. Sometimes those reasons are similar to the ones the people had in this morning’s Gospel.

It was fine when Jesus was going around healing people and telling great stories, arguing with the entrenched religious authorities, and welcoming people from the margins of society into His circle. But when He started talking about Himself as the bread of life, and the only way to the Father, and the giver of eternal life, that was more than some people were willing to buy into.

It is also more than many people today are willing to buy into, so when they hear such claims being made, they draw back. A church that preaches such a Gospel is too “narrow” and too “rigid” and too “fundamentalist” for them.

There are churches such people can find where they will not hear those claims. They will hear only about an inclusive love of God devoid of judgment and about a Jesus who seeks to enlist our help in righting all the wrongs of society. Usually, however, the people who are put off by the claims that Jesus makes for Himself, and the demands He makes on those who would follow him, simply do not go to church at all.

The problem, however, is that whenever you leave a place, you go to another place. Everybody has to be somewhere, and if you are not going to follow Jesus, you have to follow somebody else, even if that somebody is yourself and your own ideas about God and religion and morality. That’s what Joshua said to the people of Israel: *“If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose whom you will serve.”* For many people, the choice is to serve themselves.

On the other side are those who accept the outrageous claims that Jesus makes. Those people want to go where His claims are honored and where others also believe them. That is one reason that so many faithful people are leaving long-established denominations, including The Episcopal Church. They are hearing a different Gospel, a strange Gospel that speaks only of acceptance and tolerance and says nothing of judgement and repentance and forgiveness and holiness and sacrifice. So they leave. But where do they go?

Some go to Rome. Some go to conservative Protestant churches. A few go to the ancient Orthodox Churches of the East, and some go to one of the so called “continuing Churches” that follow the Anglican way but are not under the jurisdiction of The Episcopal Church. All too many people, however, fall into the trap of thinking that can go nowhere. They stay home, or they go to the mall, or they go to some serene and scenic place in the great outdoors.

But that’s not really going nowhere. That’s going somewhere. You always have to go somewhere, even if that other place is your own living room. So the question remains for those who are unhappy on both sides of this great dispute: To whom shall we go?

Jesus said, *“I go to prepare a place for you.”* And that’s great, but most of us do not want to go to that place just yet. We need a place to go to and stay in the meantime.

There are people who are working to prepare places to go here on earth. New leadership is emerging in the Church. Networking is replacing vertical authority structures, and this networking is crossing denominational as well as geographic boundaries. Old institutional structures are passing away. New structures are being born that will be friendly to those who take seriously the claims and demands of our Lord. The death throes