

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
All Saints Day Observance
21st Sunday after Pentecost
November 3, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 23:23-24

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Ephesians 1:8b-12 NRSV

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

Going Long: A Life in Christ

When I was younger, there was a **gunslinger** on the West Coast. No, I'm not quite old enough to remember Buffalo Bill. Instead, I am talking about Daryle Lamonic of the old Oakland Raiders, a consistently accurate long passer in professional football. He and his favorite wide receiver, Fred Biletnikoff, were a threat to every zone coverage in the American Football League. He was labeled the "**Mad Bomber**" because he completed so many **long passes** for long gains and touchdowns. He did this, despite being a backup quarterback behind Buffalo Bills legend Jack Kemp in his first four years of professional football.

This talent player was "**going long**" with the football quite often in the pass-oriented offense at Oakland. However, this attack on the defenses of the AFL was a high risk, higher reward strategy. After all, there are only **three results** for a forward pass in football:

- a **completion**, which typically moves the football forward and, possibly, allows for a touchdown;
- an **incompletion**, with no progress of the ball; and,
- an **interception**, in which your team loses possession of the ball, bringing in the your team's defense.

Now, I believe that there is a **lesson** here for us in the church. For decades, even centuries, church leaders have told us to take a **long view**: Things are not fantastic at the moment, but it will pass. That is nothing new to us, although we often **lose sight** of that longer perspective. You could say that most parishioners have a pretty **short attention span** when it comes to story and mission of the church. For example, most of us can recall that no matter how loudly or long an evangelist cries out the name of Jesus or holds an altar call, most of us hear it and recognize a need for change, but eventually **move on**, feeling little changed after only a few hours or days.

That sequence of change and falling back reminds me of my parents' description of their time growing from high school students to young adults as participants in the **sweeping changes** within the United States when we were **at war** with Germany and Japan from late 1941 to 1945. That was a very **long time** to be on a wartime footing, sending men and women to war and converting most of U.S. manufacturing to war materials. Everyone got into a **new routine**, and most lost sight of what had gone before. And, when the war ended, they left behind the hurried lifestyles that they had lived for two, three, or four years and settled back into the lifestyles they had known prior to the war.

I bring this up, because **God understands** this human quality of shedding the old and putting on the new. In fact, we **adapt** fairly easily to trials and difficulty. Despite our best intentions, we often make poor choices, even after professing our faith in God. Despite these and many other **faults** we have as human beings, God still offers us **love and acceptance**. And, through **God's love** for us, Jesus came to earth to **live among us** human beings.

Unlike you and me with short attention spans, Jesus held to the ultimate **long view**. And, he repeated **his message** of love and acceptance throughout his ministry, which scholars tell us lasted a total of only three years or less. And yet, Jesus was able to act so patiently, because he truly was both **fully human** and **fully divine**. Jesus could hold the **long view**, because he knew God in a way that no one else ever had before, or ever will. He knew things beyond our imagining, because he was the **Son of God**. That defined his **divine nature**.

But, by being **fully human** Jesus knew and experienced everything that you and I do: anger, joy, **humiliation**, defeat, sweat, tears, bleeding, and **dying**. On the other hand, through his divine nature Jesus had these great **insights** into human nature. He could see past the immediate problems before him understanding that, despite the hostility and hateful words addressed to him, there were unique **opportunities** to teach those around him. In this way, he imparted these distinct lessons that **contrasted** with the accepted norms of the day. These included his truly radical views on **religious practices**, the controlling nature of sin, and the constant love and **presence of God**.

This is important because Palestine at the time of Jesus had plenty of **religious people** all around the area and especially in Jerusalem. But, unlike Jesus the priests, **scribes, Pharisees**, and Sadducees were more interested in the **appearance of piety** and the strict observance of the **laws of Moses**, which they did at the expense of showing **mercy and love**. Many of these religious people wanted to secure a **lofty position** for themselves, on earth and in heaven, but wound up **ignoring** the common people who were suffering every day. Instead, **Jesus healed them** and encouraged them, helping them grow in wisdom and **faith**. With this **long view** that Jesus had, and promoted for others, appeasing and **pleasing God** remained important, but it was tied to **sincerity and truth** instead of ceremony and rules. As the writer of *Ephesians* tells us so plainly, God sent Jesus into the world so that we might understand "the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (*Ephesians* 1:9b-10, NRSV).

This leads us to the **principles** of our faith that Jesus brought to his followers. The verses in our **scripture lesson** summarized most of these for the church at Ephesus, which was in those decades that followed the **death and resurrection** of Jesus. And, that same sense of outreach and promotion of the faith led to countless other congregations being formed around the world.

That tradition lived on through the centuries, so that over 120 years ago, where we sit today at this busy thoroughfare, the people of this area felt called to come together as a **community of faith**. Presbyterians had been in the upstate area of South Carolina for over 100 years when they formed this congregation. But, it was created **to serve** those who lived here among the cotton and peach trees that I am sure dotted the area east and west of us. Today, we are the **legacy** of that spirit, because those founders of McCarter Presbyterian Church took a **long view** of the needs of the community. They felt God's calling and built a structure for worship. Before that, they were **taking care** of one another and their **neighbors**, eventually calling and installing a pastor.

Today, **we continue** many of those same traditions and **ministries**. Most of what we say, teach, and do in worship today began long before that, however. We have inherited the insights and benefited from the **sacrifices** of those who have gone before us, extending all the way back to the Church in Rome, the first **Jewish Christians** huddled in Jerusalem on the day of the Resurrection, and the founding concepts that **God** made known to the founders of **Judaism**.

From these traditions arises the term we use today in our observance of **All Saints Day**. But, as the founders of the **Reformation** noted for us, the **saints** of the church are not limited to those glorified by the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, in our **Reformed tradition**, we include those persons we have known right here, who were the **followers of Christ** before us. We saw them and heard them echoing the **wisdom of God** both here and in other congregations where we attended. Many of them were **leaders** in spirit because they experienced and beheld the power of the **Risen Christ**.

It is safe to say that a **saint of the church** holds a **long view** of their faith its traditions throughout their lives. And, in their dying they hold an even longer view of **eternity**: today and **far beyond**. They knew during their time among us that: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will...." (*Ephesians 1:11, NRSV*)

Today, we also have **an inheritance**. It is the **wisdom** provided us through **Jesus Christ**. And in his ministry, Jesus wanted to **make changes** to improve our relationship with God, adding the sincerity and compassion that were missing in the religious practices of his time. As a result, he "**went long**" in his teachings: So long, in fact that we continue to **teach his lessons** through the Gospels, and we work continually to live up to his thoughtful, deep, and **transforming message** of love and hope for **all** humankind.

As we move through this month of November, we require a **long view** to understand the overarching goal of **discipleship** that God places each one of us. We need to "Go long!" in our **commitment** to the church called by **Jesus Christ**. We need **vision** and **hope** to look beyond our immediate fears, **dreams**, and perceived failures to the unmet **needs** of women, men, and children who are not yet born, but who doubtless will face an even more **significant challenges** than we confront today.

The message from the writer of *Ephesians* is this: When we center our life **in Christ**, we have all that we need to “**Go long!**” We can face the world **unafraid**, because Christ has gone before us and assures us of **salvation** through **faith**. As our **Creator and Sustainer**, God knows everything about us and upholds and **guides us** in all that we undertake. When we **live in Christ**, all of this comes together and makes each of us **more** than we could possibly be, or become, on our own. Thanks be **to God** who makes all of this our goal and our reality **in Christ**, our Risen Lord.

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