

Drawing Near to God

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Last week, Pastor Jenny preached on the book of Joshua's one well-known passage: "Choose this day whom you will serve ... as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14-15). Our Old Testament scripture reading for this morning takes us backward into the book of Deuteronomy, which is composed of a series of sermons given by Moses before he dies and Joshua takes his place and issues his challenge to choose. In this morning's passage, Moses lays out for the people what they need to do so that God will allow them to enter and remain in the Promised Land. And, even though it chronologically precedes last week's reading, our reading for this morning answers the unasked question posed by Joshua's challenge—namely, how, precisely, does one choose the Lord?

So listen now for God's word to both the Israelites and to us from Deuteronomy chapter 4:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children ...

Moses goes on to remind the people of their experience encountering God at Mount Sinai and receiving the 10 Commandments. Which leads us to our second reading for this morning which comes from the New Testament book of James. Although James introduces itself as a letter addressed to the early Christian communities spread throughout the Mediterranean and

Near East, it differs from the letters of Paul in that it isn't written to a particular community addressing particular problems or issues that are arising. Instead, it reads more like wisdom literature, one leader's distillation of Jesus' teaching into one-liners and bite-sized nuggets. In particular, James focuses on Jesus' interpretation of the Jewish law, and as such, it fits neatly after Moses' appeal in Deuteronomy to live according to that law. So listen now for God's word to the early Christian church and to us from James chapter 1:

James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Creator of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of God's own purpose God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

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, on going 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.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

I had a classmate my freshman year in college who was an Orthodox Jew. This was nothing new to me, having been raised in a community where the Jewish population was such that our school holidays included Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, and Saturdays saw the sidewalks filled with conservatively dressed families walking to and from synagogue. What was new was that my college classmate did not believe in God.

And yet, she considered herself to be an Orthodox Jew, and she lived her life accordingly—she dressed conservatively, she said short prayers before she did almost everything, and she observed the sabbath, saving her homework until after sundown on Saturday, calling a friend if she forgot to leave her oven on and needed to reheat food to eat. Every Orthodox rule or tradition that I knew from friends and classmates back home, she observed religiously (if you'll forgive the pun). And yet, if you asked her, she would tell you without hesitation that she did not believe in God.

Given the heavy workload we all faced our freshman year, my classmate's refusal to do any work from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday was something of a bafflement to the rest of us, who struggled to get all of our work done even with those 24 hours. I distinctly remember first feeling quite jealous that she had the discipline to observe a sabbath when I felt like I was drowning in work and expectations. But my jealousy quickly turned to confusion and then curiosity as I wondered how she managed it and whether or not I would be willing to live such a countercultural lifestyle if my religion required it of me. I wasn't at all sure that I would, and I did believe in God. Which led me to wonder why my classmate continued to observe the Jewish law despite her disbelief. After all, she was hours away from home and from her religious community and she didn't seem the type of person who did things simply to please other people, so why did she not cease and desist? Why did she not either lie to her family or simply tell them she wasn't doing it? Plenty of other college students were choosing to do that with the commitments and expectations they brought from home.

When I finally felt like I knew her well enough to ask, her answer surprised me, and it shaped the course of my religious studies for the remainder of my college career. She said she continued to observe the Jewish law because when she had told her parents that she didn't believe in God, their response was that that was fine so long as she continued to observe the Orthodox practices. At first, this struck me as rather superficial; I assumed her parents' request stemmed from a desire to keep up appearances. But as I continued to listen to her explain her parents' rationale as well as her own decision continue observing the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law, it became clear that appearances had nothing to do with it. Instead, for my classmate's family, faith was less about what you believe and far more about how you lived.

This was surprising to me. It made me realize that I had grown up understanding faith to be something you intellectually assented to or wrestled with, and that how you acted, how you lived your life, was meant to be an extension or consequence of those beliefs. What you believed about God was meant to shape how you lived your life. In other words, for me, belief came first, actions second. I believed in a God who taught that we should love our neighbor therefore I volunteered. But for my classmate and her family, it was the opposite—actions were primary, beliefs secondary. For them, how you lived your life shaped what you believed about God. My classmate's parents wanted her to keep observing Orthodox practices both because that was the most important aspect of their faith, and because they believed that if she lived her life in that way, it was more likely to lead her to a belief in God.

This idea what you could act your way into belief reminded me of the phrase, "fake it 'til you make it."

The first time I hear that phrase, I was 15 years old, 30 feet off the ground, and petrified of heights. I was wearing a harness that connected me to a cable above my head and I was standing on a swinging step trying to figure our four things:

1. Why had I agreed to do a high ropes course when I was deathly afraid of heights?

2. How was I meant to reach the next swinging step when neither my legs nor my arms were long enough to reach it?
3. How could I get back on the ground without having to traverse the remainder of the ropes course?
4. If I threw up, could I aim it in such a way as to hit the high ropes instructor on the ground who was cheerfully telling me to “fake it ‘til I made it”?

That first time on the high ropes course, I did figure out how to get back on the ground without completing it. It turns out that if you start crying and shaking with fear, they will lower you down. It’s embarrassing, but it gets the job done, and it saved at least one person from being thrown up on.

I, however, am somewhat stubborn and I don’t like failing; and so, over the course of the next 3 years, I learned to manage my fear of heights and eventually came to even enjoy parts of the high ropes course (though I still think those swinging steps are the worst). As I did, I learned that the phrase “fake it ‘til you make it,” (far from simply being one adult’s inane attempt at encouragement) was, in fact, part of the high ropes curriculum. And, I did, eventually, learn to do just that—to act like I was not afraid until I either forgot to be afraid or got my feet back on solid ground. Fake it ‘til you make it helped me not only get through those sadistic swinging steps, but also survive when fear or doubt threatened to overwhelm me.

It had never, however, occurred to me that that phrase, “fake it ‘til you make it”, could be applied to faith. But as I listened to my classmate explain why she practiced Orthodox Judaism despite not believing in God, it struck me that that was what she was doing. She was acting as though she believed until she actually began to believe. I don’t know if it worked, if she ever came to believe in God, or even if that was her parents’ end goal—I transferred after my freshman year and we lost touch. But when I transferred, I transferred to a school with a solid religion department that offered courses on Judaism, taught by an Orthodox Jew. And what I learned over the course of the next three years was that many people do understand Judaism, particularly Orthodox Judaism, to be a religion that defines faith not as something you believe in but as something you live.

It’s an understanding of faith that both James and Moses would have approved of. For James, the doing is what makes faith real, genuine and authentic, and not simply a bunch of words we say but don’t actually mean. For James, you can know what someone believes by how they act, how they live their lives, specifically, if they are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; if they care for orphans and widows and live lives shaped not by the values of the world but by the values of God. For Moses, following the law—living our faith—is how we keep our part of our covenant with God. But it is also how we draw near to God. Living our faith, following God’s commandments and teachings, is how we choose God, how we come to know God; it is in the doing that we begin to know who God is and what it means to believe in God.

So. My question for you this morning is, if someone were to look at your life, what would they think you believe?

Amen.