

Sermon for 8:30 a.m. Sunday, 18 October, 2026 @ Bethesda United Methodist Church

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost/Laity Sunday

Scriptures: First Lesson: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalter: (Page 819) Psalm 89 ; Second Lesson : 1 Thessalonians 1 :1-10 ; Gospel Lesson : Matthew 22 :15-22

Reading the Bible to start worship is always weird. Here we believe this is God's Word, and yet how can we honestly treat it like anything we say, or read , or sing, elsewhere? It's elevated, but it's still us. That always means it change from age to age and moment to moment for us, doesn't it, to be honest?

We begin by calling this Laity Sunday ... and right away distance ourselves from any other topic, focussing on the difference between leader and people, rank and file, all other eras and this moment, with all its uncertainty and difference of opinion.

So, bearing that in mind, ponder for a moment what it's like to have me tell you what it means to have Abraham tell God he can't go any farther being God's slave, or even just working for him, unless God makes it clearer what's the difference between the two of them.

God treats Abraham kindly, thanks him ... but says he'll never see God's face, or he'd die ...they're that different ...and then gives Abraham a cleft in the rock where he can hide and see, and be, more than all the rest of this small crowd that's become so special in history.

Leave it at that. We can't have a God we can equal. We also, seriously, can't easily adjust to second place, like all the animals and clouds and oceans and stars...and other groups of people, as well as individuals, who are bound to think differently from Abraham just because we all think individually, and because God and Abraham have been so close already.

Part of being laity and clergy, in other words, is being not God. Period. Like everything else, and everybody else.

Then we celebrate that a little, with a Psalm. It's amazing how good how useful, to be in a world where something someone ...is so impressive, so beyond-anything or anybody, else, and yet we're able to have that much to say to him/her, and care, and learn... which is what both preachers and lay people do, what church is mostly about, what explains and scares and thrills and guides and enables us to grow, and even makes the end-of-everything we call death, into more than lights out ... more, according to scripture, than anything we've seen or understood. Psalms help, and we use them, not just to expand things, but to calm down with and call forward with.

Then as usual, we take a page from the short history the Bible gives us of this way, this outfit, this part of the human race we call church, and glean what we can about the few years of explanation and organizing and trial and error and trust that are available, and settle down as well as we can ...arguing and changing horses and trying over again to harmonize this body we call church. The hints we get from those who actually organized and wrote and shaped into lasting parts and promises, are wonderful ... and we give this day to some of the wonder of being one and many together.

And finally, we get the challengers, the ones who already had things organized before Jesus arrived... and isn't it beautiful how sharp Jesus was, and how complete the challenge against religion as a whole and ours in particular gets described in today's put-down of the opponents to our way of thinking and being?

You can't escape these things, and today's a beautiful reminder. Let us pray: Dear Lord, we're leaders and followers, rank and file, and all yours, wherever we sit and however we lead and follow. Bless us in our disorder, help us organize humbly and lead kindly. Keep us together, and refine our efforts to be your people, even as we see more and more how much like the rest of the human race we church folks are, and understand little by little that our way is just a doorway to much more than believing or even being ... just a section of this marvelous creation you love so dearly and clearly, through Jesus Christ. Amen.