

Sermon for 12 September 2021 at Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8 :27-38

« **God will take care of you.**»

We start our readings today with a passage from Proverbs. In the wonderful image of Wisdom as a woman that keeps the Bible from giving all the power and sense to males, Wisdom stands on the street, mostly emphasizing the point that we get what we deserve in life, and that we either already know, or learn by experience what's right. This is helpful, but it's good that Proverbs also takes a prophet's view at times and says not everybody's poor because they're stupid or lazy but, sometimes, people get things we don't earn, both good and bad.

Then we go to a totally different place and hear one of the most beautiful and optimistic pieces in the whole Bible. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork," as I learned it from the King James version as a child. The Bible, and regular worship, certainly help us learn how to practice gratitude, and learn positive thinking, with poetry, and song and in many cases give the push into celebration, dancing, clapping, playing music and singing, that make our whole bodies better and help us heal over and over.

Then James, as we found last week, lays it out in strong, simple language, that faith doesn't amount to much unless it shows, doing is the shove we need, hour by hour and year by year. Not only schoolteachers, but all the rest of us, get told straight that our language, our tone, our tongues, do more than almost anything to make or break the fellowship, the risen body of Christ, and to help church improve the world along God's lines.

This is not a Sunday to take it easy. Mark has Jesus take a turn, speak directly to the disciples, asking where they think he's headed. When Peter says "You're the Messiah," Jesus draws a picture like none they've heard, and Peter Well, you know the lines: "Get thee behind me, Satan."

I got this far, and the old hymn we just sang came to mind. All this tough talk begins to miss the point after awhile. We're not here to be lectured to, or even to be told we're doing well. As Mark so often does, after Jesus makes a point, something interrupts the conversation and we go even deeper. Not only does Jesus say he's headed for pain and worse, not only does Peter protest and Jesus puts it even stronger, puts Peter down ... but now he turns to the crowd and tells every one of us, "Take up thy cross and follow me."

And I just couldn't put it that way and leave it. There has to be some central point we've not declared today.

This is 9/11 week-end! This is not only 9/11 week-end, it's the 20th anniversary of 9/11! We've been full of it all week. Vivian put a beautiful prayer out for us last Sunday.

Does anybody reflect on how small that is for the rest of the world; how sympathetic most of the world was for us at the time; and how that ties in with everything else we've been dealing with ever since?

We behave like that really rocked our boat. We make it into our world's being rocked; and have we really, as a people, faced the fact that most of the world has been more traumatized, and more than once, just in the last century, than we have?

All this divisiveness, and stone-walling, and a lot of this wealthy getting wealthier, has speeded up over the last twenty years. You can say it has nothing to do with 9/11 ... but haven't they been telling us about global warming, and nuclear weapons, and poverty, and racism, and all those big things, for at least this century, the 21st?

"Take up thy cross and follow me!" That has to be the early church talking. Jesus didn't say that everybody had a cross before he had one. He DID say it in everything he taught, but not literally. The church figured out, with the resurrection and all that spiritual growth that we now read of in Paul, and James, and yes, even old discredited and reinstated Peter. To say nothing of Mary Magdalene and all those other women who quickly got pushed back once the organizing got going and they fit into the Roman and yes, the Hebrew sexism of their day ...

But the point is clear: If we don't have a deep encouragement in our stomachs, and our hearts, and the way we sleep and love and even argue.... If our trust isn't the biggest thing about us ... how close are we to the Bible? How far are we as Americans from the point we make here every Lord's Day, and every night when we lie down and, in our own individual way, ask Jesus to take us where we're going "before I wake?"

We have a lot of work to do, folks ... and it all heads in one direction. Either it's a walk with God, in a world that's good but is full of trouble that we have a part in straightening out, with God taking care of us every step and every breath of the way Or we're not living like we say, or like we should, or like we hear in church that we could.

I can believe God will take care of me. It's work ... It's made for me. It's glorious. It hurts. It does more than anything else I know of to suit, and fit, and guide, and heal.

It's the Word, through all the other great religions, and through all the non-religious who are, as the Bible puts it, "not far from the kingdom of God," so that "who are we to judge?" "Judge not."

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever," as it comes to us.

"God will take care of you."

Amen.