

Sermon

July 3, 2022

Sermons and Sandcastles

Pastor Dan Peterson

Sermons are like sandcastles. The tide of time washes all of them away. Each of us invariably forgets much of what we hear.

And there is a good reason for why: a lot happens from Sunday to Sunday!

Of course, preachers are no exception.

I often have trouble recalling what I preached about last week – let alone last month or last year. Because of that, therefore, I want to do something a little different, something I first tried back in May. Instead of preaching one sermon on a single topic, I would like to preach **three sermons** ... on three different topics.

Now don't leave!

It would be as challenging for me to preach three full-length sermons consecutively as it would be for you or anyone else to sit still and listen to all of them! No preacher, however good, could hold a congregation's attention for **that long** without boring them to tears.

When I say that I would like to preach three sermons, I mean three *mini-sermons* or *sermonettes*, each of which would last three to four minutes and be based on our readings for today.

Here's the fun part: all you have to do is remember **one of them** by choosing the one that resonates with you the most.

I even have a voluntary activity I will share at the end that will help you remember the sermon long after you hear it today.

So, what do you think? Shall we try it?

Great! Let's begin!

Sermonette #1: Is God male?

It happened one day in the theology course I taught earlier this year at Seattle Pacific University.

Why, I asked the class, do we commonly refer to God as male? Isn't God beyond sex or gender?

The room was silent.

The reading for that day addressed the question, yet nobody had a response.

Finally, a young man in the back of the class boldly raised his hand. His answer totally caught me off guard.

“Jesus,” he replied. “Jesus is the answer.”

At first, I thought he was kidding.

(Earlier in the term, I told my students that if they didn’t know the answer to a question, they could say “Jesus” and I would at least give them partial credit!)

But this student was serious, so after a few moments I asked him to clarify his point.

“Jesus refers to God as Father,” he explained. “So, if Jesus said it, it must be true.”

Okay. Let me pause here for a second.

How would you respond to this student?

Is it sufficient to say that because Jesus said it, I believe it, and that settles it? Or would you follow up with more questions?

Naturally, I chose the latter path.

“What did Jesus **mean**,” I asked, “when he referred to God at one point as *abba*, which is the Aramaic word for father? Was he saying that God is *literally* a man? Or was he trying to say something about the kind of relationship he had with God? After all, the word *abba* can also mean ‘daddy,’ and Jesus uses it while praying shortly before Judas delivers him to the authorities for execution according to Mark 14:36.”

Now that’s not a bad follow-up!

Upon reflection, however, I wish I would have added something.

Sure, Jesus uses the term “Father” for God, but what about *other perspectives* in Scripture?

Take, for example, our first reading of the day.

Isaiah 66:10-14 offers a **fascinating alternative** to the language of father for God.

At first, the author refers to Jerusalem in feminine terms as the mother of God’s children.

This is, to quote the great Dr. Evil of the old Austin Powers movies, “pretty standard, really” when it comes to the various writings of the Hebrew Bible.

The prophets in particular frequently refer to Jerusalem or Israel in feminine terms as God’s daughter or wife.

But notice what happens in v. 13.

In a flash, and just for a moment, the maternal metaphor migrates from the city to God, the mother of its residents.

“As a mother comforts her child, so I [that is, God] will comfort you,” it says, “you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

This does not redeem the Book of Isaiah from patriarchy, much less the Bible as a whole. Nevertheless, as Patricia Tull observes in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, passages like our first reading show that Isaiah “contains promising elements that unsettle any notion that God is . . . male [in terms of God’s being] and that the feminine is powerless” (p. 257).

So, what is *your* take?

Is it **good news** to you that the Bible does not uniformly speak of God as a man or in terms drawn exclusively from male experience?

Is it comforting or challenging for you to view God not only as Father but also as Mother?

Sermonette #2: A Bible for Men

It’s probably a strange question following the topic we just discussed, but I’ll ask it anyway.

What does the Bible offer for *men*?

In a culture where young men especially seem lost and in need of direction, can Scripture provide examples for these men to follow?

One answer comes to us from Kelli Mahoney, a self-professed “Christianity Expert” who works in youth ministry and writes for young people (“Characteristics of a Godly Man,” accessed on 7/2/22 at www.learningreligions.com).

For teenage boys, she says, it’s never too early to become a man of God.

Godly men, she writes, possess at least eight common traits. Let’s see if you men in the congregation measure up:

First, a Godly man is pure of heart. He avoids lust and temptations of the flesh.

Second, a Godly man keeps his mind sharp by reading the Bible regularly and, in the case of teenagers, doing his homework.

Godly men also have integrity, they speak cautiously, they devote themselves to God, they give without complaint, they persevere in the face of hardship, and—consistent with John Calvin and the modern Protestant work ethic—they work hard.

Indeed, Mahoney explains, “. . . a Godly man knows that God wants us to work hard and do our jobs well.”

Now, I have nothing against integrity, perseverance, or keeping one's mind sharp, but for the life of me I cannot figure out what makes these characteristics specifically Christian or inherently masculine!

I mean, shouldn't we teach the values of integrity and perseverance, for example, to adolescent girls *as well as* adolescent boys?

And what, secondly, makes any of these traits Christian or biblical?

Would it surprise you to learn that Mahoney neither quotes nor cites Scripture anywhere in her article?

For a biblical perspective on masculinity, perhaps we must turn to a male Christian author (!) like Dale Partridge.

According to Partridge, American culture and the modern church have feminized the Jesus of Scripture.

They have made him weak and robbed him of his masculinity by producing "a caricature of Christ based on the anemic and soft-smiled Roman Catholic paintings where Jesus looks like he's put on a fresh coat of blush and tweezed his eyebrows" (Partridge, "The Masculinity of Christ in the Face of Effeminate Christianity," p. 4; accessed on 7/2/22 at <https://relearn.org>).

A quick trip back to the Bible, however, reveals what Partridge calls the fierce and rugged manliness of the messiah.

Jesus, he says, was "the epitome of manhood – a stalwart in mission, bold, obedient to the point of death, fearless in His proclamation of truth, sacrificial in His acts of love, and resolved to do His Father's will. Jesus had force, authority, and control in a way that marked Him as virile and robust" (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Indeed, as Partridge concludes, Jesus was the "manliest male who ever lived" (*ibid.*, p. 16).

Now, I have no doubt that the Jesus of the Gospels possessed deep courage and true resolve. He stood up to the religious authorities of his time as well as the great imperial power of Rome and paid for it with his life. But once again, I cannot figure out for the life of me what makes His courage *exclusively* masculine.

Consider the story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible. She boldly risked her life to save her people. What makes her courage any less significant than Jesus'?

Or think of early women martyrs who died for their Christian faith like Perpetua and Felicity. They stood alongside men to face ferocious animals in the coliseum. Was their courage somehow inferior to their brothers in Christ?

And what about the traits of "**force, authority, and control**" that Partridge attributes to Jesus?

Is this the same messiah who blessed the peacemakers while praising the meek and the merciful (Matt 5:1-12)?

Is this the same messiah who welcomed the weary by describing himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt 11:29)?

Is this the same messiah who chastised two of his disciples for their desire to be in charge and in control instead of serving others through love (Luke 9:54)?

And is this the same messiah whom Paul argues we should imitate by treating others gently and bearing one another’s burdens, as we heard in Galatians 6, our second reading for today?

In short, do not Jesus and Paul challenge the kind of toxic, worldly masculinity so prevalent in our culture today by telling men – contrary to Partridge’s **misreading** of the New Testament – that it’s not only okay to be kind, gentle, patient, self-controlled, and generous, but that these characteristics are Godly because, as Paul says in Galatians 5:22, they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit?

If so, then is this not good news for Christian men, men who have been **freed** from needing to prove themselves by exhibiting force, authority, and control, the qualities that Partridge praises and wrongly attributes to Christ?

Does the Christian faith free you, in short, to be the man God truly calls you to be – the man, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, who lives for others instead of simply living for himself?

Sermonette #3: Life Before Death

Most American Christians, I submit, believe that Jesus died for their sins and that because of this belief they will go to heaven after they die.

The famous megachurch pastor Rick Warren serves as a great example.

He once referred to life, which the Book of James beautifully describes as “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14) as merely a rehearsal for spending “trillions and trillions of years with God after we die.

On each of our last days, God apparently scoops the soul out of our body and transports it to the abode of Paradise where we live with God forever.

Now imagine for a moment the kind of endless future Warren describes.

How would you occupy yourself after even a few decades, let alone trillions and trillions of years?

Would not your heaven become hell?

This problem occurs whenever we project our notion and experience of time onto eternity.

It raises another problem as well.

What point is there in being Christian if the whole purpose of our faith concerns what happens to us **after we die**?

Don't you want to participate in a faith that emphasizes life *before* death, the kind of life where you become what Paul calls "a new creation"?

Jesus likewise calls us to new life on this side of the grave in Luke 10, our Gospel reading for today.

"Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you," he tells his disciples in v. 8, "eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'If you believe I was crucified to pay the debt you owe God for your sins, then you will go to heaven after you die.'"

Wait a minute.

That's not what Jesus says!

Let's look again at the same verse: "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

Do you hear the good news?

It's not, as Jesus tells his disciples in v. 19, that they have the "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions."

It's not even that they can exorcise demons.

The good news is that their "names are written in heaven," and as Paul says in Philippians 3:20, "it is **from there** that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Salvation, in other words, has come to us on this side of the grave.

The kingdom of God has come near, Jesus says, it has **already begun** to manifest itself as evident in the healing of the sick and the release (in modern terms) from psychological torment.

It appears in the kind of freedom Paul describes in Galatians 5, the freedom from cultural expectations to be ourselves before God; the freedom to forget ourselves in love and service to the neighbor; the freedom to be released from our desire for possessions so that we may give generously to those in need.

Dear friends, the kingdom of God has come near!

Life **before** death awaits you!

Hear the good news and be freed!

Choose One

You have now heard three sermonettes. I invite you to choose one to ponder briefly.

The first was on how the Bible speaks about God.

Is it comforting or challenging for you to view God not only as Father (Jesus) but also as Mother (Isaiah)?

How many of you would like to ponder that? Raise your hand and look around.

The second was on the New Testament for men.

Does the Christian faith free you to be the man God truly calls you to be, a man comfortable with exhibiting supposedly “feminine” traits like patience, kindness, and gentleness rather than force, authority, and control?

How many of you would like to contemplate that? Raise your hand and look around.

The third was on life **before** death.

Is Jesus’ proclamation that the Kingdom of God has come near good news to you, or is salvation primarily something you believe awaits you **after** you die?

How many of you would like to ponder that? Raise your hand and look around.

Now, would you like to remember what you have pondered for the week?

If so, I invite you to **talk to someone** else who raised their hand when you did.

What do they say about God as mother, about being a kind and gentle Christian man, or about life before death?

Conclusion

Yes, it’s true.

Sermons are like sandcastles.

The tide of time washes all of them away.

But some sandcastles can last longer than others when they are deliberately pondered.

This morning, may the sandcastle you ponder be one of them.

Amen.