

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from Jesus, the light and life of God in the world. Amen.

When it comes to preaching, I've never been a stranger to controversy. Over the years, I have addressed many controversial topics from this pulpit.

When it comes to popular Christianity, for example, I have rejected, from this pulpit, as unbiblical, the idea that everything happens for a reason, or that God has a plan. If you look more closely at Scripture, you'll see for example, in Jeremiah, that God has plans, indeed that God has a "Plan B" kind of God. That is to say God accommodates and adjusts to the decisions and choices we make in this world.

The Book of Esther is a great example. In that book, Esther is asked by her cousin Mordecai to intervene as Queen of Persia and save the Jews from persecution.

Mordecai then says, "If you don't do this, help will come from another place," which most scholars, myself included, believe is a reference to God. This story shows us that God is adjusting, or potentially accommodating, to the changing circumstances, as it were, on the ground. God doesn't simply have one unilateral plan; God has many plans, and the Bible challenges the claim that everything happens for a reason.

I think here especially of the book of Ecclesiastes, which says not that everything happens for a particular purpose, but that time and chance occur to us all.

I've also challenged repeatedly from this pulpit, the idea that heaven is our final destination. Let me explain: Early Christianity, as evident in the Creeds as well as Scripture, point not to heaven as the final destination, but as something more like a "layover," the final destination of which is "the new creation." One, as Revelation 21 says, where God will descend and make God's home among mortals. So Heaven is a layover. The final destination is the new creation, of which Jesus in His resurrection is the first fruits.

That's why at the end of the Nicene Creed, which all Christians with the exception of evangelicals, affirm, is stated that "we look forward to the resurrection and the life of the world to come." This is interesting to me because in the ancient world, there were a variety of various philosophies and mystery cults that all preached escape from the world as salvation. This is why Gnostic Christianity, the first and greatest heresy of the Christian church, denied that God could actually be incarnate in Jesus Christ, because flesh, indeed all of matter, is evil, and the purpose is to escape that with regard to the spirit.

The Christians and the Jews said otherwise. The creation God made, though flawed, is essentially good. We see that in the book of Genesis; God will not abandon God's creation, therefore; God will not whisk us away to some other world; God will not perform a "soul-ectomy" when we die, which is to say, a soul-removing operation. That is all heresy.

Instead, we profess the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, which is to say that God is so committed to this world, God will not abandon it. But on the last day, which is the first day, God will turn it into a new creation. resurrecting us, and transforming the cosmos.

From this pulpit, I've also challenged the opinions of many Christians, that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are fundamentally two different gods: A God of wrath in the Old Testament, a God of grace and mercy in the new. Anybody who's read the book of Isaiah or the Psalms, however, knows that there is a message of grace and mercy that runs through a thread throughout the Hebrew Bible, which is then confirmed in the New Testament.

There is in other words, consistency here to suggest that the God of the Old Testament as a Lesser God or a wrathful God, again, belongs to the category not only of Gnosticism but of anti-Semitism, as if the New Testament corrects what was missing in the old.

From this pulpit, I have challenged the idea that Jesus was apolitical. Remember that when Jesus was crucified, he was crucified between not simply two "thieves" or "bandits", but, in the Greek, two "revolutionaries," violent revolutionaries, who, unlike Jesus, the Good Shepherd, drove their followers to destruction at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus wasn't a violent revolutionary, but his message of nonviolent revolution is clear throughout the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Luke. God's upside-down kingdom, to use the language of Martin Luther King, has political implications. Things will not simply be the way they are: wealth, for example, will be redistributed. This is again, not to say that Jesus was a Democrat or a Republican, but simply that his message and his ministry had, and should still have, political implications.

From this pulpit, I have also challenged the idea in popular Christianity of Jesus as Superman, a kind of otherworldly figure who has powers that we lack. In place of Superman, however, the New Testament gives us the Son of Man, an individual who, because of the incarnation, was limited. Mark 6, for example, tells us that he could not perform deeds of power in his hometown, because the people around him didn't believe. Mark 15 has Jesus cry out in abandonment from the cross. And Mark 13:32 has Jesus say that when it comes to the appearance of the New Age, only the Father knows, not even the Son. All of these passages indicate that God in Christ is fully and totally human, that God in Christ has accepted and embraced limitation, and that God in Christ, as Paul says in Philippians, has emptied God's self to become present with us.

I've also challenged from this pulpit supersessionism, which is to say that Christianity completes Judaism. I hate that way of thinking. The Church does not replace Israel. But when it comes to the message of grace and mercy that both share, the church confirms what we find in Israel, only now for Gentiles.

And there's still more! When it comes to Scripture, I have, as a good attorney, defended Judas Iscariot, arguing that his betrayal of Christ was unintentional, and then

he committed suicide, according to the Gospel of Matthew, because he realized he was wrong.

I've argued that Jesus had a conversion experience, which implies that he was wrong, or at least short-sighted about something. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to a woman, "I have come to save the house of Israel, not to the dogs," and she says in response, "Sir, even dogs eat crumbs from the Master's table." Jesus there has a shift in orientation, a reorientation, a conversion. He recognizes that his ministry is not only to his own people of Israel, but to the world, as we see in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, where we are called to baptize, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, all people.

I've challenged the idea that James, the Book of James in the New Testament was, as Martin Luther says "a letter of straw," because he says it lacks the Gospel. I disagree. I think the Gospel is there; you just have to know what to look for. It's in chapter 1.

I've challenged the idea that the cross by itself does not save us. When people claim "He died for you," that is insufficient. Without the resurrection, the cross is simply one more tragedy in the annals of history. It's through the resurrection that God vindicates God's Son on the cross; that God shows us that death will not have the last word. And that's the essence of good news. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that "if Jesus was not raised, you are still in your sins." So when somebody focuses exclusively on the cross as the locus of salvation (nerd scholars call it crucicentrism), they are missing what Paul Harvey would call "the rest of the story." Without the resurrection, we cannot sing songs about victory. It's the resurrection that confirms what God was doing in Jesus through his life, his ministry, his death.

I've challenged from this pulpit, whether the "pastoral epistles," First and Second Timothy, as well as the letter to Titus, are or should be even included in the Bible. Why? Because they all reinvent or reestablish the kind of social hierarchy where men are over women, that Paul and his original letters destabilized, insofar as he maintained that all are one in the body of Christ, not only Jew or Greek but also male or female.

From this pulpit. I have suggested that a woman wrote the middle part of Isaiah. From this pulpit, I've argued that or shown that a woman is identified as one among Jesus's disciples. Do you know who that is? We have a missionary named after this person: Dorcas, or Tabitha in the Aramaic. According to chapter 9 of the book of Acts, Dorcas is identified explicitly as a disciple, and we're told that Peter raised her from the dead.

From this pulpit I have questioned, literally understood, the virgin birth — on solid Biblical grounds. I have also disqualified myself as a Catholic priest because I reject, on solid Biblical grounds, the perpetual virginity of Mary. Why is that important? Because I think it devalues a woman's body. To say that in order to be acceptable to God, you must be pure and chaste; the flesh is evil.

I've argued from this pulpit, that there was a husband and wife among the disciples of Jesus, which you can see if you go to Joel's favorite chapter in the Gospel of Luke,

chapter 24, the story of the road to Emmaus and the encounter of Christ in the breaking of the bread.

And from this pulpit I have preached on the Song of Songs, which, as you know, is erotic fiction in the Hebrew Bible. Now, why is that controversial? The editors of our lectionary have left it out entirely, perhaps because of their “Christian” sensibilities. I’ve tried to bring it back, insisting that this story is another affirmation that the world, indeed the flesh that God created, is good.

More broadly, again, from this pulpit, I have preached on a number of modern-day controversies, on same sex relations, on abortion and reproductive rights, on immigration and our status as a sanctuary church, on gun control, and most importantly, on climate change, and with it the sinful addiction we have to petroleum; an addiction that undermines the calling we have from God to be stewards of this creation.

From this pulpit, I have challenged the prevalent version of toxic masculinity in this culture, which equates “male” with being strong and powerful; opting instead for Paul’s version of what it means to be a man or woman, in terms of kindness to others, gentleness, patience.

I even claimed from this pulpit that we need to bring Satan back, not to worship him, but to remind ourselves, in symbolic terms, that evil is real. That there is, in words attributed to Martin Luther, a power of evil in this world that brings about death, destruction, and disease. That’s important, because it doesn’t attribute those things to God. It doesn’t attribute those things to God.

Now. We have here a number of controversies; there are many more, but you’re probably wondering to yourself, “Why is Pastor Dan rehearsing controversial sermons?”

Well, I have three reasons. Number one, my call is to challenge you when it comes to your faith. Why? Because I believe a thinking faith is better than blind submission. You agree? (You just submitted it to me, which is ironic, but yes, good!) All right.

Number two, I want to know the truth. I want to know what the Bible actually says, versus what people think it says. Faith after all, is seeking the truth, no matter what, going where the truth leads you; being surprised by what Scripture says when it comes, for example, to the important role women played in the ministry of Christ and in the churches over which Paul was supervising.

Third, and finally, I’m interested in applicability. I became a pastor because I got tired of simply thinking about the faith. I wanted to live it in a community with others. As such, I preach from the Bible not only sermons of comfort, but also sermons that challenge us to rethink the way we live in the world. Who are we called to be?

And then as a postscript, I preach on controversial topics because I want to spark your interest. I want to engage you when it comes to the Bible. “Gee, does Ecclesiastes really say that?” “Gee, this Jeremiah really deny that God has one unilateral plan for

everyone?" "Gee, is that the case that everything happens for a reason and God has a plan is not in the Bible?" So my purpose there is to spark your interest to invite you to engage scripture and see for yourself.

In short, I don't preach on controversies arbitrarily. I do it for these clear-cut reasons, the goal of which is to stimulate and encourage a thinking faith.

Okay, you might be saying, that's all well and good, but why bring all this up today?

Well, the reason is simple. I bring up all these controversies to show how they pale before a topic of controversy I have never addressed from the pulpit. Can you guess what it is? Giving money to the church.

Giving money to the church.

I have been reluctant to talk about giving money to the church for multiple reasons, but one stands out.

A relative of mine attended church on his own as a teenager. His parents and his sister did not. One day, the pastor came by and looked at him, and insinuated that his parents were not giving enough money to the church, and that in order for him to be there, they had to change their giving.

That person left the church because of the way the pastor abused tithing, or the invitation to give. And so because of that, I tread lightly when it comes to this subject.

Today, however, necessity demands otherwise, as indicated in a letter I sent earlier this week to the congregation. We are facing a huge budget shortfall, and we need your help. Now more than ever, we all need to figure out how to give more and why.

We do so, I would argue, not simply to sustain the longevity of this church, but to carry out our mission of "proclaiming the love of God in Christ for everyone."

As a former president of Seattle University used to say, "No money, no mission." We can't do what we do for each other, for this community, and for the world without financial support. We can't make a difference in our fellowship together. We can't call people out of isolation into this fellowship. We can't enjoy the beautiful music and liturgy of this church. We can't enjoy the opportunities for education. All of that requires funding.

Unfortunately, as if this was already not difficult enough, the first reading makes it even more difficult. Take a look at Amos verses 21 - 24, if you wish, in your bulletin.

Amos writes, speaking on behalf of God,

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your [organ; the songs of your choir.]

I will not listen to the melody of your harps

[or your trumpets on Reformation Sunday.]

But let justice – and this, from Confirmation is, I believe, Phoebe’s verse –

let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

(Words, of course, that Martin Luther King would pick up centuries later.)

I think it’s easy, based on this passage, to conclude that we shouldn’t bother with tithing. God’s not interested in our music or songs or offerings. God has no interest in our solemn assemblies – or in contemporary language, God has no interest in organized religion. Perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right: we should sell everything we have as a church, give it to the poor and find other ways to serve.

But I don’t believe – and I disagree with Bonhoeffer, another controversy – I don’t believe that this is what Amos is saying. This isn’t a treatise against organized religion, or a condemnation of ritual and song. The point is that ritual can’t be separated from care for the poor and justice. As the Biblical commentator Carol Sharp says, “Israel has always known that ritual observance and compassion for the powerless should never be separated.” Or, as I have said many times from this pulpit, everything we do in here, our giving, our sharing of the peace, our reconciliation with one another – everything we do in here is practice or rehearsal for how we live out there, and giving, indeed, is no exception.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I don’t bring up giving to be controversial. I don’t want to talk about giving. But I bring it up because our church, this little light on Queen Anne Hill, needs your help. To those of you who give already and abundantly, thank you. Your giving has sustained this ministry, enabling us to care for one another, as well as to serve the less fortunate all around us. Your giving has helped people avoid eviction. Your giving has helped put food on the table for Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas dinners. Your giving has enabled all of that. So again, we thank you for it. Your generosity, along with those before you, has sustained this ministry for over 100 years.

I’d like to conclude then not with a mandate or a command, but an invitation. We now have the opportunity to dig a little deeper, if we believe in the mission and ministry of this church. And so, anticipating the next 100 years, let’s give as we can. Let’s do so as an expression of gratitude for the grace we receive. Let’s do so as an expression of gratitude for the fellowship we enjoy. Let’s do so as an expression of our Christian purpose to serve our neighbor, especially the least of these.

And let’s close with a question: Are you with me on this?

If so, say it loudly:

All God’s people say, “Amen!”

Thanks be to God.