

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# TIME AND CHANCE

*A sermon preached the 13th of November 2016, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Malachi 3: 14 – 15, 4: 1 – 2; Ecclesiastes 9: 11; Matthew 5: 45; and the Collect for the Day.*

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'Your words have been stout against me,' says the Lord. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against thee? You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the good of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? Henceforth we deem the arrogant blessed; evildoers not only prosper but when they put God to the test they escape.'

— Malachi 3: 14 – 15

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**W**e suffer setbacks. I'm fresh off seeing the team I wanted to win, a team heavily favored, lose in a stunning upset. What can I say? Michigan was terrible last night and Iowa played its best game. Hat's off to the Hawkeyes.

We suffer setbacks in life, and we wonder: What difference does it make, trusting God? Does the Most High notice as we struggle to live as God asks us to in a world indifferent to him? If we pan back the lens on the reading from Malachi appointed for today, we hear people crying out, "It doesn't pay to serve God. Those who take life into their own hands are the lucky ones. They break all the rules and get away with it." [Malachi 3: 14 – 15]

We say such things. And we may be, as Malachi's first readers were, jealous of the patriarchs who were privileged to hear God speak. Abraham got it straight from the horse's mouth, the Most High commanding him to leave Ur and go to the land that he would show him. Moses on Mt. Sinai heard the same voice speak out of a blazing fire and pillar of cloud. But you and I don't get that. And we may feel sorry for ourselves that we don't.

It's at just that time, on Mt Sinai, when God first wrote his word, the divine finger writing into the tablets the ten commandments and authorizing Moses as the mediator of the covenant to write the word of God with authority. That happened at the very time God created a people. Up until then God had been dealing with individuals. At Sinai the ragtag lot of them were made into a nation, God's own darlings. Now there would be a kind of buddy system, so we have the word of God written. Because it's only in that way that you can know what

God expects of me, and only in that way that I can know what God expects of you. Each of us has a nearly infinite ability to imagine God approves of whatever we approve of. But it's only because of Holy Scripture that we have a fire at which to keep our feet.

**I**f anyone could expect, in an ongoing intimate relationship with the Father, to receive direct revelations in real time, Jesus could. When he was baptized, God spoke in an audible voice which Jesus and others could hear, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." Yet Jesus depended on the word of God revealed. He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." And Jesus' own words in the New Testament, one-tenth of them are direct quotations from the Old Testament. Jesus lived with the same conditions we do.

So we don't have some kind of second-class arrangement. We have the same arrangement the only begotten Son of the Father had. The scriptures were sufficient for him. They are sufficient for you. And the scriptures teach us we are not to expect a demonstration of God's favor whereby the Almighty rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

That's what we expect, and we should not do so. God *doesn't* in this life just reward the righteous and punish the wicked. In fact God *rewards* the wicked and, what's more, sets this out as a model for us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the

evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” [Matthew 5: 44 – 45] God doesn’t just all the time send rain on your hopes. He sends it on the hopes of people who oppose you. This happens all the time. We notice it every four years in this country.

**L**ikewise, Jesus on another occasion, with similar effect, says, “Love your enemies. Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High because he’s kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.”

When things go your way, don’t assume it’s confirmation of God’s approval. The Apostle Paul warns us about that. He says, “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that *God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*” If things are going well for you, you can’t assume God is approving of your ways. It may be that the Most High is just trying to overcome evil with good as is his standard procedure.

We are not Manichaeans. We are Christians. If you know God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon good and evil alike, you’re less likely to be superstitious about the setbacks you experience. Ecclesiastes says, “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.” [Ecclesiastes 9: 11]

Just because you studied hard and got a five on every AP exam that doesn’t guarantee the doors of your preferred college will open to you. If they don’t, don’t take it personally. That’s what Ecclesiastes is saying. This is the common situation in which we find ourselves, where God is dealing with us in indiscriminate ways, in ways

that wouldn’t unduly advantage us in terms of outward circumstances.

**D**oes that mean it doesn’t matter how you live your life? It matters. It certainly means that many of God’s best saints, his most devout followers, have been called to go through extraordinary adversity. Throughout scripture we see it: many who experience rejection, persecution, abuse, overwhelming calamity, severe illness. Think of Joseph among the patriarchs. He was betrayed by his brothers who sold him into slavery and then falsely accused by his boss. Think of Job in all his affliction. Think of Elisha the prophet. His predecessor Elijah was a walking visual aid of what obeying God looked like. God used Elijah mightily. And when it was time to die instead of dying, a chariot and horses of fire swooped down, the angelic host took Elijah from this life to the next without having to die.

We’re told his successor Elisha had a “double portion” of the Spirit of God on him. The miracles he performed were an escalation of the miracles of Elijah. And when it came time for him to die, when we expect greater chariots of fire would usher him into God’s presence, what happens? An illness kills him.

We needn’t wallow in self-pity because of the setbacks we suffer, or take them as evidence that we’ve been singled out for an unjust fate. No. We’re just walking the path of all those who’ve trusted God, including those sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, as William Hale Miller is going to be now. Baptism isn’t fire insurance; it doesn’t follow that Will’s life will be all peaches and cream. What it will mean is that he’s marked as Christ’s own forever. And *that* is enough. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,  
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission  
please email us at [office@ststephenschurch.org](mailto:office@ststephenschurch.org), call us at 415-435-4501,  
or visit us at [www.ststephenschurch.org](http://www.ststephenschurch.org).*