

Sermons at Saint Mark's

Dr. Greg Simon

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2010

Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Calm Certainty, Restless Urgency

A couple of months ago, when we were planning our annual stewardship campaign, Rebecca said she thought this would be the best week for me to talk to all of you about Stewardship. I hadn't yet looked at our readings for today. But I have to wonder if Rebecca had peeked. I imagine she looked at today's Gospel and thought, "November 14 would be a good week for amateur hour." Today's readings, especially that Gospel, seem to me like stories we need to approach from the side rather than head-on. So I'll start with a different story.

After finishing our work on Saint Mark's annual campaign for 2009, our Stewardship Committee started to plan our work for the year to come. We thought we should start by clarifying our official responsibility, so we went to the source: the Saint Mark's Vestry bylaws. And there we learned that our mission, at least according to the Vestry bylaws was to "Develop an annual revenue forecast for the Cathedral." It is an understatement to say that we were not inspired by that mission.

But then one of the quick-thinking members of our committee pointed out that at least our burden was a light one. Our work for the whole year would take only one memo to the Vestry, and it would be a short one. As short as this: "To: Vestry; From: Stewardship Committee; Regarding: Annual Revenue Forecast; God's grace is abundant. We will have enough." Eight words would do the job perfectly. And as long as we didn't date the memo, we could just use it again and again every year. A 100% accurate annual revenue forecast, forever and ever, Amen.

We had a short laugh about that. And then one of our more practical members said, "That's cute. But seriously, how are we going to inspire people to give enough to continue our ministries and support our staff, much less live into our mission." And then we

got back to work planning our annual campaign for the year to come.

I've thought about that exchange several times since. And I've realized that our half-joking back and forth about the mission of the Stewardship Committee was a lived description of what we are called to do – not just as members of the Stewardship Committee but as members of the Body of Christ. We are called to live in two distinct places at once: in calm certainty of God's abundant grace and in restless urgency for our mission. At the same time – calm certainty of God's abundant grace and restless urgency for our mission.

The Gospels are certainly filled with reminders of God's abundant grace – and reassurance to us that we can calmly and certainly depend on it. Jesus' arrival as a human baby was heralded by the Angel telling us "Be not afraid." The passage in Luke that contains our annual campaign theme begins with a string of those reassurances: the birds of the air carefree in the care of God, the flowers of the field that do not fret or toil. Jesus finishes by saying "The Father wants you to get the very kingdom itself."

At the same time, the Gospels are filled with urgency and restlessness. Our Gospel reading today is one of those overflowing with that urgency. The message is clear: the coming of God's kingdom will change things, and sometimes in ways that will frighten us. Things we believed we could not survive without will be transformed, or even pass away. Things will never be the same – and that is exactly the point. We are reminded over and over that the Holy Spirit is not a warm blanket. Instead, it is a fire. This is an especially important message for us to digest as Saint Mark's goes through a time of transition. Things here at Saint Mark's will never be same. And that is not a threat. It is actually a promise.

And finally the Gospels are also filled with reminders that there is no conflict between calm faith in God's abundance and passionate urgency to create God's

kingdom. It is not a conflict between the calm and the fire. It is a balance. The calm needs the fire, and the fire needs the calm. For every lesson about war and division, there is another about trust and surrender. In today's Gospel lesson, we hear that we will be betrayed, hated, and even put to death – but that not a hair of our heads will perish. That is a powerful message of saving grace to those of use with very few hairs to spare.

What does this have to do with our annual campaign and our financial pledges to support Saint Mark's? It has everything to do with it, because the vital balance between faith in God's grace and urgency for God's mission may show up most clearly in how we live with money. Our relationship to money is one of the places where we struggle with knowing and trusting God's abundant grace. As we said when we renewed our baptismal vows last week: We promise to put our whole trust in God's grace and love, even when it involves money. The theme for our annual campaign comes from one of a series of stories and messages about faith in having enough – focused directly on money and possessions. In Eugene Peterson's translation, the message is very clear: "What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving."

But the Gospels don't tell us that we should never think about money. Instead, the Gospels are filled with stories about the power of money. But the Gospels don't talk about the power of money to encourage us to focus on getting it and having it. Instead, the point is that our money can do things that matter – both good things and not-so-good things. And we are ones who decide about what our money will do – good things or not-so-good things. It is not enough to just let it go. We need to set it on fire.

Our traditional image of the fire of the Holy Spirit comes from the description in Acts: the tongues of fire that rested on the faithful. We usually picture little flames sitting on top of every head. When I think of that, I'm reminded of a billboard I used to see in airports a few years back. It was an ad for a wireless internet company, aimed at business travelers. It showed office workers running furiously between cubicles with tongues of fire licking at their rear ends. The caption read "I think they got your email." Thinking of that image, I wonder if God might be more likely to let the fire of the holy spirit rest there – on our rear ends. First, because God does call us to get moving. And second, because that would put the fire of the Holy Spirit close to our

wallets. If we hope to be set on fire by the Holy Spirit, we cannot expect our wallets to stay cold.

I can pledge to Saint Mark's because I have gradually come to believe that I will have enough. That isn't an easy lesson for me. I'm a worrier and a tightwad by nature. But proportional giving, gradually increasing our pledge as a proportion of our income, has been an important spiritual discipline for me. I need to practice letting go of money – over and over and over. And that has changed me. I think more and more about any money I earn or any money we spend, asking myself: What would 10% of that be?

I choose to give here at Saint Mark's because I believe that is a place where money will do things that matter. Our budget is about mission and passion, certainly not about luxury. The fire of the Holy Spirit is burning here, even if we keep the heat turned low to save on the gas bill.

Why do you pledge to Saint Mark's? Or for those of you who have not done so yet, why will you pledge to Saint Mark's? You pledge, or you will pledge, because you know that you will have enough. That does not mean that you can give away money and not notice the difference. The whole point is to notice a big difference – in the way you think about money, in your passion for the work we do here, and in the way your heart is open to transformation.

Now back to my story about the mission of the Stewardship Committee. Since the annual revenue forecast was taken care of forever and ever, we decided we needed a bit more inspiring mission. So we decided that our work is: "to transform Saint Mark's Cathedral Parish into a growing faith community of grateful givers of time, talent, and treasure." The Vestry agreed that was probably a better mission.

And we decided that our annual memo would have to be a bit longer than eight words. The revised, longer memo would be something like this: "To: The Vestry and People of Saint Mark's; From: Stewardship Committee; Regarding: Annual Revenue Forecast; God's grace is abundant. We will all have enough. And the fire of the Holy Spirit will come to set your life (and at least part of your wallet) on fire. Once that happens, nothing will ever be the same. That is a promise. Thanks be to God for that."