

# Sermon

## “The Foolishness of Faith”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 7, 2021

The Third Sunday in Lent

### Prayerful Illumination

**Lord of foolish frailty, it is, of course, folly for us to keep returning to your Word when nearly all of the noise of this world is telling us that you are a spent force, a habit of a bygone era when the world was simpler to understand and our lives were more easily contained in categories to which all agreed.**

**And yet here we are, counting on a Word from you to us.**

† A word which will last,  
† a word which has the power to create, and  
† word to which we can cling in these uncertain and unbalanced times.

**We know that the word you will offer will almost certainly sound like foolishness, because it points to a way of being in the world which is so different from the status quo that it is hardly recognizable. Indeed, it suggests that we might find a way to let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven — and thus usher in a new heaven and a new earth.**

**So, Lord, help us to hear the gospel today, not as those who are perishing. Give us hearts to hold onto your foolishness — wiser than human wisdom. Amen.**

*1Cor. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,*

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

*20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

*Ex. 20:1 Then God spoke all these words:*

*Ex. 20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me.*

*Ex. 20:4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*Ex. 20:7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*

*Ex. 20:8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in*

*them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

*Ex. 20:12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

*Ex. 20:13 You shall not murder.*

*Ex. 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.*

*Ex. 20:15 You shall not steal.*

*Ex. 20:16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*Ex. 20:17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

## **I. Once upon a time . . . long ago . . . but not beyond our memory**

**A. We were trapped in an empire so great and mighty that it was a super-power among the empires around it.**

**B. We were trapped in an economy that made slaves of us and in which all the excess capital trickled to the top of the pyramid where the fat-cats and politically-connected kept their thumbs on any impulse toward change or movement toward a more egalitarian distribution of wealth.**

**C. Because the tyrant and his sycophants at the top of the pyramid controlled**

† **the economy,**

† **and the military,**

† **and the justice department . . .**

**there was no hope that we could escape the half-lives we were living just to keep food on the table and a roof over head.**

**D. And then, in a stunning reversal of what was possible happened.**

† **We cried out in our distress**

† **God heard our cries and sent help**

**E. After much conflict, and dramatic displays of power, and not a little violence — we were on our way to a new home — a Promised Land which was so full of potential blessing that we imagined it as a place — Like Willie Wonka’s chocolate factory — to be “flowing with milk and honey.”**

**II. When our rescuer, Moses, told us that God had some new rules to govern our common life, we swore we would follow them *before we saw what they were!***

**A. What we knew is that, whatever God had in mind, it had to be better than**

† **the life-stifling, and**

† **dehumanizing existence we were leaving behind**

**B. So in chapter 19 of Exodus we exclaimed, “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.”**

**III. So, here’s the question for the Third Sunday in Lent “How much has changed?”**

**A. The vast majority of the economy is organized to benefit the top 3%**

- B. Many work more than one job just to scrape together a precarious living wage.**
- C. Even those who are blessed with work — too often find that there is a Pharaoh up the corporate chain who annually demands more productivity at less cost.**
- D. Justice appears to not be equitably distributed**
- E. And in ways eerily like the plagues of the book of Exodus — our world is wearied by:**
  - † **Locusts**
  - † **Pandemic**
  - † **violence within and between nations**
  - † **an unsettling hopelessness is present in many poor communities both near and far.**
- F. Into this moment, we as people of faith, are asked**
  - † **“are you ready to say, ‘Everything the Lord has spoken we will do?’”**

#### **IV. The 10 Commandments are God’s alternative to Pharaoh’s world.**

- A. An alternative in which we acknowledge God as Lord of all and head of our life.**
  - † **God seems to know what Martin Luther would later say in his catechism — that we are prone to exchange our trust in the Holy One of Israel for a god who is easier for us to control:**

*Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.*

**—Martin Luther, Large Catechism, [The First Part: The Ten Commandments].**

- B. An alternative in which we are cautious about attaching God’s name to our petty agendas and**

**assuming that we are on God's side when, in truth, we are pursuing our own plans. That is what the admonition about using the Lord' name in vain is really about.**

**C. An alternative in which we are firm in the knowledge that God made the world in six days and felt no compulsion to show up for work on the seventh. There was no anxiety in God that would drive God to endless labor.**

**† As the prophet would later remind us (Isaiah 30:15):**

*In returning and rest you shall be saved;  
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*

**D. An alternative where we honor one another — especially honoring our elders.**

**E. An alternative with no:**

**† murder**

**† adultery**

**† stealing**

**† lying**

**F. And an alternative where we stop measuring our success and our value with the yardstick of our neighbors.**

**† Where we stop evaluating them as to whether they are good or bad**

**† Whether they are better or worse than ourselves.**

**† Where we stop thinking of them as fellow competitors in an economic struggle in which the one who dies with the most stuff wins.**

**G. The ten commandments are merely an invitation to enter into a new way of being in the world which is vastly alternative to the current state of things.**

† **That should not be surprising — our world is not a place radiant with the love of Christ — no, it is rather a dangerous network of domination and subjugation which can easily entangle us.**

**V. I imagine that God waited until we reached Sinai to have Moses deliver these astonishing alternatives because God knew how crazy they would sound to us while we were still entrapped in the world of Pharaoh’s Egypt.**

**A. Understood how unsure we would be  
Departing the brickyards:**

**We long deeply for a new life — that has potential to be equitable, just, and generously kind.**

**We are double-minded and resist the journey to newness.**

*“First, wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a more attractive promised land; and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. And there is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.”*

— **Michael Walzer in Exodus and Revolution**

**VI. When the Apostle Paul writes that he is delivering the “gospel” (Good news) of “we proclaim Christ crucified,”**

- A. He is acknowledging that Jesus, who lived according to the 10 Commandments looks for all the world like a loser —**
- † **A peasant preacher / teacher**
  - † **under-employed**
  - † **convicted of sedition and receiving the death-penalty in a most publicly humiliating way...**
- B. “Christ crucified” was *not* the way things were “supposed” to go.**
- † ***God was supposed to show up in might***
  - † ***God was supposed to kick tail and take names***
  - † ***God was supposed to wreak vengeance upon our oppressors***
  - † ***God was supposed to establish a 1000 year reign of peace and prosperity.***
- In a world of domination and subjugation these were the natural expectations — That God would be just like us, only more so.**
- † **More powerful**
  - † **More violent**
  - † **More convincing**
  - † **more impressive**
- C. But Paul, and indeed the whole early church, embraced a different narrative — one in which the apparent loser actually had won in a stunning reversal of fortunes.**
- † **God’s asymmetric response to our apostasy was to suffer for us**
  - † **to have patience with us**
  - † **to protect us from the consequence of our folly**

**to invite us to begin again to rebuild a world in  
which God’s alternative vision of**

- † Economic equity**
  - † legal justice**
  - † neighborly kindness**
- Rules our lives.**

**So - today - on the third Sunday in Lent . . . will we join with  
those who adopt the foolishness of faith? Will be say,**

**“Everything that the LORD has spoken we will  
do.” ?**

**That is the work of Lent.**