

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany ≅ Year A**  
**Saint Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**January 30, 2005**

## **How Shall We Live?**

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### **Lessons for the Day**

- ✘ Micah 6:1-8
- ✘ Psalm 37:1-6
- ✘ 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- ✘ Matthew 5:1-12

### **Homily**

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and empowers us to love and serve both God and Christ. Let's now collect ourselves in the presence of God, and wait on God's word for us today . . . (Pause)

Amen.

One of my dearest spiritual friends says that there are only three questions in life that matter. The three questions are these:

1. **Is there a God?**
2. **If there is a God, is this God for us or against us?**
3. **If there is a God -- and God is for us -- then what does that mean for our lives here and now? How shall we live?**

These are all good, hard questions.

We are here today (most of us anyway) because we have wrestled with -- ***and want to continue wrestling with*** -- the answers to each of these three questions.

For most of us, **the first question** ("*Is there a God?*") is one we have resolved with a "yes". Ours may be a tentative *yes*, a conditional *yes*, a "yes" based more on faith than on evidence, but we have come down on the side of yes. Yes, there is a God -- a *something* above and beyond and beside and within all of life -- a *something* that we name as God. So we claim this "yes" -- and we move on.

**Question two** inquires "*Is God is for us or against us?*" and -- for most of us -- the **evidence is mixed**. Tsunamis wash across the ocean, and tens of thousands perish. Young people pledged to serve and defend their country are killed when helicopters crash. More immediately, those we love get sick and die. Our own bodies fail and we wrestle with what it means to lose the power and the mastery we once had.

That's not the whole story though. Miracles happen. Babies are born. Cures occur. And after the hard cold death of winter, spring brings with it the rebirth of nature and the beauty of new life.

Even in the face of the mixed evidence, we carry on. We believe -- or we *try* to believe -- that not only is there a God, but that this God is a loving and merciful God, a God who wills only good for our lives.

With the worried father in the Gospel of Mark -- the father with the convulsing child -- we cry out,

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

Mark 9:24b (NRSV)

And so we are come to the hardest of our three questions:

If there *is* a God -- and God *is* for us -- **what does this mean for our lives here and now? How shall we live?**

In one sense, questions one and two are easy questions: they require thought and rumination but no action. Answering either of these questions does not compel motion -- it merely resolves an intellectual Gordian knot.

But this third question -- now there's a tough question. And the toughest part of the whole question is those last four words:

**"How shall we live?"**

How shall we live indeed?

Perhaps the answer to that question is found in one final question -- one posed to me often by yet another spiritual friend. We worked together for several years and -- whenever we confronted a difficult choice -- she would ask: **"What is God trying to accomplish here, and how can we cooperate?"**

All of our Lectionary readings for today point -- in some way -- to the goals of God. They point to the often strange and counterintuitive style of living that belief in God calls out of us.

**From Psalm 37:**

"Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of evildoers . . ."

Psalm 37:1 (NRSV)

**From Micah 6:**

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Micah 6: 8b (NRSV)

**From 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1:**

"God chose what is foolish . . . God chose what is weak . . . God chose what is low and despised in the world . . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God. *'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'*"

1 Corinthians, portions of verses 27-29 and 31 (NRSV)

These readings are examples of what I call the "upside-down-ness" of God. As a human being, I *do* fret because of the wicked; I *do* find myself envious of evildoers. I *do* struggle to do justice, to love kindness, to walk with humility -- before God or humankind.

Somehow that's not what our upside-down God desires. Somehow this God we have (*or this God who has us!*) is a God who is trying to accomplish something different, to bring in a new and radically different world from the one we envision.

What is God up to?

How do we cooperate?

(In sermon review on Thursday, we talked about today's gospel. Don pleaded, "Whatever you do, don't read the beatitudes again. They've heard them a thousand times." He's the rector, and so I won't. You can all read anyhow. But we can't ignore their message.)

Our upside-down-God seems to be in the business of celebrating and rewarding the very things to which the world -- to which I (and perhaps you?) -- often give lip service and little else.

What is God up to here, and how can I cooperate?

Jesus has told us what, exactly, what God is up to. Christ told us exactly what God is looking for in humanity: mercy, purity of heart, peacemakers and the like. It still seems sort of amorphous -- or at least it seems amorphous to *me*. How should we live in concrete terms? What shall we do?

Some years ago I came across a brief essay that helped make all of this real for me. Here's the story.

The essayist related his life and his conversion -- he grew up smart and vigorous, and he lived a life of some success in the business world. He was -- as the essay remarked -- "formed by the ethos of attack-and-engage". At some point the writer began to reflect on how he would respond if -- like so many saints before him -- he was called before a court and forced to renounce his faith or die.

There was a time, he noted, when he envisioned dying with words of anger and outrage on his lips -- openly disdainful of those calling him to recant. He would steadfastly refuse to recant, and would die with a sneer on his lips.

But then God began this mysterious upside-down work in the writer's life -- a work the writer himself did not fully understand. A "last shall be first and a first shall be last" kind of work. And -- by the time of the essay -- the writer remarked:

"I still refused to recant. My love of God still triumphed over my love of life. Now, however, the triumph was greater, for my love of God also triumphed over my love of the barbed comment, the quick retort, the last salvo.

Now I wanted to speak words of love and healing, and to ***die in a way that my assailants saw the face of God.***"

And there's that blooming upside-down-ness of God all over again. That "first shall be last" and "meek shall inherit the earth" thing.

And there, also, is the answer to how we shall live.

What is God up to? How shall we cooperate?

Let us not *die* so that others see the face of God.

Let us *live* so others see the face of God, as well.

Amen.