

Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

The last thing that Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

“Hmm,” said a small voice in his ear. “Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind, either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes - and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting....So where shall I put you?”

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

“Not Slytherin, eh?” said the small voice. “Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that - no? Well, if you're sure - better be GRYFFINDOR!”

You might recognize that scene
from the dining hall at Hogwarts
in the first of the Harry Potter books.
All the new students
have to put on the sorting hat
which will look inside them
and allocate them to one of four houses,
the brave ones
to Gryffindor,
the smart ones
to Ravenclaw,
the hard workers
to Hufflepuff,
and the ambitious
to Slytherin.

If you go online,
you can find quiz after quiz
that purports to determine
which house you would be sorted into.
Of course,
it's pretty easy to guess the answers
that would get you into Gryffindor,

along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

It might only be fiction,
but it all plays on that human desire to belong.
We all want to belong somewhere,
to be in
rather than out.

And so it's not surprising
that the same pattern
is repeated
in terms of our faith.

When I was a young adult
I was involved
with a Christian group on campus.
It was a great group of young adults,
passionate about their faith, committed to bible study
and sharing Christ with others.
One of the tools we were taught to use
was a little tract called
“Two ways to live.”
It began by asking about God
as our loving creator;
it ended
by asking the reader to make a choice,
between obeying God
and following Jesus Christ,
or disobeying God
and rejecting Christ.

I don't think
I actually ever used it.
Whenever I had the chance to talk about faith with someone
it was in the context of a relationship
and a conversation,
and there was a question
or a struggle
or a joy
that logically led

to talking about Jesus.
An evangelistic package
just didn't quite fit.

And I was never really comfortable
with the kind of binary choice
that "Two ways to live" required you to make;
my experience of life
was that it was far more complicated
and that one time choice, though important
was only part of the story.

Today's psalm, at first glance
reads a little like that tract,
Two ways to live.
The way of the righteous
or the way of the wicked.
Make your choice
and take the consequences,
salvation
or damnation.
Either you're in
or you're out.

Three months ago
we read this same psalm.
Then, I remember saying
that there are two ways of reading this psalm
- probably more than two, but two will do for now.
One is
to see it as a declaration.
This is how the world is.
You are on one side
or the other.
In or out.
Get used to it.

But back then
I said
that there was a second way of reading it.

Instead of reading it as a declaration,
a kind of sorting hat
to determine
if people are righteous or not,
we can read it as an invitation,
an invitation
to be counted among the happy, counted among the blessed,
an invitation to discover more about God,
an invitation to grow our roots longer and deeper,
an invitation to hang out
with God's friends.

That's kind of where
that sermon ended.
But as I was reading the psalm again this week,
and reading what the experts said about it,
I realized
that part of why it can be read like an invitation
is that it is one.

This psalm
is the first psalm
in the whole book of psalms.
And that's not accidental.
It forms an introduction
to the whole book of psalms.
It is there
to invite us to read and use
the whole book of psalms
as a guide to life, a guide to blessedness.
Time and time again
the psalms invite us to reflect on how God has spoken to us, how God has acted,
and to respond in faith.
And the psalms are
a model
for that response.
They are in effect
sample prayers,
conversations with God
that we overhear,

and that help us
to learn
to pray.
To learn to pray
and to learn to live.

And have you ever thought,
that Jesus himself
prayed these psalms?
They were his Scripture,
his Book of Common Prayer.

The psalms are not the only places we learn about how to pray
and how to live.

The whole of Scripture does that for us.

And so we had our reading from the book of Proverbs this morning,
a picture of what it might look like
to be faithful to God.

And from James,
how to live in peace
and draw near to God.

And of course, Jesus' practical words,
not just to be servants,
but to welcome children
because in so doing,
welcoming those smallest, most vulnerable, even most troublesome among us,
we welcome Christ himself.

And living as people of faith, as Christians, involves
not must one choice
but many.

Yes, we make a first choice
to follow Jesus,
the choice of baptism, reaffirmed in confirmation.

But that's not the end of the story.
Because we have to keep making choices, keep following Jesus.

It reminds me of what happens in the service of marriage.
We make a very public, very decisive choice
when we make our wedding vows.

The promise to love,
comfort, honor and keep
is made once.

But the decisions to love,
comfort, honor and keep
have to be made time and time again,
day after day after day.

Marriage is about more than one day. It's about the whole of life.

And so too is faith.

We choose to believe in God, we choose Jesus
again and again and again.

And the psalms,
and the whole of scripture
provide wise guidance
on how to do that.

Today,

we've going to do something we did a few times last year. I'm going to ask you to turn to
those around you
and discuss a question.

And the question is,
can you remember a time
when you looked to scripture
to help you make a decision
on how to live?

What was it?