

Feast of St James, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Have you ever wondered
how it is
that we read the bible readings
we do
each Sunday?
The bible is a big book,
indeed a big collection of books. Sixty six books,
eleven hundred eighty-nine chapters,
more than thirty thousand verses:
which of these thousands
do we read
on any given Sunday.

In some church traditions
it's the pastor's
choice.
Most often
they choose to do sermon series;
three months on Romans
or four weeks on faith.
It can be a great way
to get to know
one part of our bible
or one theme in our faith
in great depth.

But one of the dangers
is that you only ever read
particular parts of the bible;
you only ever read
the pastor's
favorites.

Yesterday
at the vestry retreat
we explored what our individual leadership styles are.
Both Alex Rich and I
were visionaries.
We like the big picture; we like big ideas.

And of of course, what that translates to in the bible
is that if I chose what we read each week,
you would have spent the greater part
of the last seven and a half years
hearing from the letter to the Hebrews,
and likely
the gospel according to St John.
Definitely not Romans,
and probably not too much of Mark, either -
and in the Old Testament
more of the prophets
and less of the stories.

But one of the reasons I'm glad I'm an Episcopalian
is that I don't get to choose.
We have a lectionary,
a list of the readings
from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles and Gospels
for each Sunday of the year,
and for all the major saints days.
And the lectionary
has been developed by many people,
in different countries and different Christian traditions,
so that it isn't subject to individual preferences
or biases. Well not too much, anyway!

So when it comes to choosing the readings,
we simply look up
the list.
BUt one of the questions people sometimes ask is,
what about if there's some major issue
you need to preach about.
What do you do
on 9/11
or when major events happen in the world?
Doesn't the lectionary
get in your way?

But what I have found, and it never ceases to amaze me,
is that every time I have needed to preach on something like that,
the lectionary has come through.
Somehow
the Spirit of God

has worked in the formation of the lectionary
so that there is always
a word for us.

And perhaps we shouldn't be surprised.
Because if we worship a God
who is living and active,
and who speaks to us through the word of scripture which itself, as the letter to the Hebrews
says,
is living and active,
then God will always have something
to say to us.
God will speak to us
the word that we need to hear.

And it's happened again today.
The psalm set for this Sunday of the church's year - not even the one for the feast day of St
James - through the rest of our readings are the feast day readings -
the psalm set for
the seventh Sunday after Pentecost in Year A,
the Sunday closest to July 27,
is one that is particularly appropriate
for the celebration of our patronal festival, the celebration
of the founding
of our church.

Because it's a psalm of thanksgiving,
a psalm of thanksgiving
for all that God has done.

Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name;
make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him,
and speak of all his marvelous works.

Glory in his holy Name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Today is a day
when we give thanks to God
for all God has done
here at St James

over the last one hundred sixty one years,
 for all God continues to do, and will continue to do
 in the church, this community,
 and our
 lives.

You may or may not know
 that our church began in 1853 as a “religious society” which met in a local schoolhouse.

Joel L.G. Smith soon donated two acres of land, and by 1854 a church building was completed. Recording local history in 1882, Judge J. Lawrence Smith wrote that the church was called St. James “in complement to James Clinch through whose instrumentality and liberality the church was organized and in its infancy, mainly supported.”

So if we're honest
 our church isn't actually named for St James
 but for one of the founders and major benefactors!
 And as a result, we're not entirely sure which of the four or so St James mentioned in the New Testament
 we should consider our patron saint.
 But since the shell was adopted as our logo at some point in the past, we've decided to claim St James the greater, brother of John, whose feast day is July 25, and who has as his traditional symbol
 a scallop shell.

So back to the early history.
 The first service in the original church building
 - this building
 that we still gather in to worship God -
 took place on July 3, 1854, when the building was consecrated. Within a short time a rectory was built and a cemetery laid out. The vestibule, tower and louvered belfry were added to the church in 1877, and the pulpit was added a year later. And the U.S. Post Office chose to honor the church by adopting the name “St. James” for this hamlet.

That all sounds very pragmatic.
 But underneath it
 lies the deep faith of those who founded our church,
 those who wanted to have a place to pray together
 and gave sacrificially not only to build the building
 but also to provide a priest,
 their deep faith
 and the faithfulness
 of God.

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make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him,
and speak of all his marvelous works.

Glory in his holy Name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

And over the last one hundred sixty one years
so many people have worshipped here
and served here.

We've had 16 rectors (and perhaps you might like to raise your hand if you remember them):

Carlton P. Maples

Charles S. Williams

John W. Bookmaster

Henry V. Degen

James H. Lee

Ingraham W. Irvine

John Q. Archdeacon

William Holden

John C. Runkle

Joseph E. Mills

Peter D. MacLean

McCrea H. Cobb

Donald A. Webster

Richard A. Burnett

Michael E. Bartolomeo

Raewynne J. Whiteley

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But the clergy are only a tiny part of the ministry here.

The first person baptized here
was Madeline May Smith, in 1854.

She was buried here in 1867, just thirteen years old.

Julia Hallock was confirmed here in 1859.

In 1858, Legmen Blydenburgh and Julia Hoel were married - though interestingly those early marriages all occurred not in the church building itself, but in private homes or the Rectory.

In 1890, Earle Stanley Smith was baptized at what is now All Souls in Stony Brook, originally known as St James Chapel, and part of our parish.

In 1890, William Stanley Lawrence and Helen Smith were married here, now in the church.

On Good Friday, 1926, Phyllis and Henry Whittaker were buried here, having died a day apart of Broncho Pneumonia.

Five members of the Murray family, Russell, Margaret, Carlton, Joseph, and Allana were all baptized in 1949. Suzanne Guthrie was confirmed with 21 others in 1962.

I could keep going - we have church records of everyone who was baptized or confirmed or married or buried here from 1854 till today.

But as I went through the registers, I began to see more and more names I recognized, and for the sake of privacy, I thought it might be better not to name the more recent ones!

But the registers only tell part of the story.

Over the last 153 years, God has been worshipped
over eight thousand
times, just on Sundays.

Individual acts of worship
likely come close to a million.

We've educated children,
studied the bible,
raised money for missions,
built houses,
cared for one another,
and reached out to our community.

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make known his deeds among the peoples.

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and speak of all his marvelous works.

Glory in his holy Name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Thanksgiving.
That's the focus of our psalm,

and the focus of our celebration today.

But the psalm goes one step further. As well as inviting us to give thanks, it invites to take one more step.

To search for the LORD and his strength;
continually seek his face.

I was reminded of that this week,
when,
as many of you know
Don Goodman died after a yearlong battle
with pancreatic
cancer.

At the prayer service on Wednesday night,
person after person got up to tell us about him,
and there was one resounding theme:
Don Goodman
was a good man.

Don was someone
who lived his faith;
it shaped everything he did,
from his personal interactions
to his commitment to reforming the prison system - which didn't just mean acting from a
distance,
and being involved in a program to combat violence,
volunteering
in a maximum security
prison.

He sought God
and God's strength,
and he brought God's presence and strength
into the lives of many people.

And today we have two more people seeking God's strength and presence in their lives.
In the Episcopal Church, there is a little known rubric that says
when people are baptized privately,
they should be brought before the whole congregation as soon afterwards as possible,
where their parents and godparents will reaffirm the promises made on their behalf, and where
they will be welcomed into the household of God.

Last Saturday,

Audrey Lillian was baptized in her father's church, the Roman Catholic Church in Ronkonkoma.
We now welcome her here into this household of faith.

Last summer,

Nikola Franklin was baptized in the Goodman's garden, because his godparents were visiting and we weren't sure Don would be well enough to be in church the next time they were in town.
We now welcome him here into this household of faith.

And so I now invite their parents and godparents to bring them forward, as we continue with the service.