FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

March 21, 2021

*“On Making Choices”*

One of my favorite movies is an old one from 1967 called *Bedazzled—*now please do not confuse the 1967 *Bedazzled* with the 2000 *Bedazzled,* which was an American remake. I am talking about the Peter Cook, Dudley Moore British film.

 Their movie is a modern retelling of the story of Faust, the Medieval German legend of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for all the worldly knowledge, power, and pleasures of the world.

 In the 1967 British film, Dudley Moore plays the part of Faust in Modern London. His character is a sad sack, fry cook who wants the pretty woman he works with to fall in love with him. She, of course, barely notices that he is alive.

 Peter Cook plays the part of the Devil, whose name is Mephistopheles. He appears to Dudley Moore promising him the love of the pretty woman, and so much more. All Dudley has to do is sign-over his soul to the devil who promises him he will not even miss it.

 Why doesn’t God offer such great deals, wonders Dudley? Mephistopheles tells him it is because God works in “mysterious ways.” He says, God has created all we need, has even created human beings, and given us all sorts of gifts. The most important gift we are given, says Mephistopheles, is the gift of free will, the freedom to make decisions and to choose for ourselves. Often, he says, this makes God’s activity in our lives feel subtle or indirect.

 “Well, that’s no fair,” grouses Dudley. “And it’s no help! I think it would be far more helpful for God to be plain spoken and up-front so I’d know what to do!”

 I thought about the movie because I see this morning’s Scripture pointing to that very thing. Scripture is showing us how God *has* been plain spoken. Indeed, the two passages we heard—and so many other passages throughout the Bible—show and tell us just how God has been, and *is* still speaking to us. Oh goodness, there is a phrase for you, “God is still speaking to us.” “God is still speaking,” where have we heard that before. God is not only still speaking, God has spoken to us in the most poignant, the most heartbreaking, *and* the most beautiful of ways ever dreamed of: which is through the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

 We hear this message of God’s care and guidance first in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah. His are words of comfort and promise.

 Now to talk about Jeremiah offering words of reassurance is an unusual thing because mostly we know him as a grouch and a scold. He was also known as the “Weeping Prophet” because of the message he was first called upon to proclaim.

When he first started out, God sent Jeremiah to proclaim the destruction of Jerusalem from the northern invaders. He was the one called upon to shame the Israelites and detail the sins they had committed against God. Their sin was so great that God withdrew the blessings that had been lavished upon them.

For many, many years, and for many chapters in the book that bears his name, Jeremiah proclaims God’s message that the nation of Judah would experience famine, foreign conquest, plunder, and captivity in a land of strangers.

Finally, though, Jeremiah is given a new message of hope and compassion. The suffering of the past is over. God has heard the cries and seen the suffering of the people—just as God had seen the predicament of their ancestors and had rescued them from Egypt.

They—*we*—cannot rescue ourselves, so God decides to rescue the Israelites again. To begin this task, God does not nullify the first covenant, it is reformed. In this remake, or this reformation, the source of their fidelity will not longer be exclusively in the laws. Instead, it is going to be the indwelling of God’s own Word and Spirit in the life of each person, and in the life of all the faithful people, together. The help God is promising is a help that lies *within* the believer.

From now on, says God “*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* [v.33]

God will write it on our hearts.

From now on, all people will know God in a way that is far more intimate and personal than they ever have before. From that time on, to know God in this way is to experience God’s deep love and care for each human creature. What is more: knowing how God cares for each of us is to also be aware of how God cares for *all of us*. Which is to say: God’s love is given to me, and to my sister or brother beside me, and to all of my sisters and brothers. It is not that God’s care for me is not special. What we are supposed to learn from our relationship with God is a largeness of God’s heart, and God’s amazing capacity for generosity.

The message was presented to people in great need. The Israelites were a people who had been devastated by war, hunger, slavery, and a destroyed homeland, which resulted, finally, in their homelessness.

 Jeremiah’s scolding had shown them how they were brought to this sorry state because they had fallen away from God’s ways. They had neglected God’s laws of compassion—especially for the weakest, the powerless in their community. Also, they had stopped loving and cultivating justice among peoples. Finally, they had demonstrated their disdain for God’s ways, and the promises they had made to God in the Sinai Covenant, by worshipping other gods.

For these reasons, God’s anger had burned hot against them and they were made to feel it throughout their lives. But then something happens. After being so disappointed and angry, God’s pity and the love and delight God has in human beings is reawakened.

In the reading we heard this morning, God has decided that it is time to reform the people and remake the relationship. It is time to bring hope back into their lives. It is time for the people to know God’s grace. Thus, as we heard, God offers them another chance, and a new future with the promise of even greater intimacy.

From now on, humankind’s future will not depend on our moral perfection. It will depend on God’s perfect mercy, and with this cover of perfect grace, we can continue our journey through life—no matter what comes.

In time, God’s desire for our well-being—and God’s understanding of our continuing great need for help—culminates in the sending of God’s only child—our beloved Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the reading we heard from the Gospel of John, Jesus has been preaching and teaching for three years. In that short time, he has become well known as a healer, and prophet who speaks God’s truth. Indeed, in the story before this morning’s reading, Jesus has brought his friend Lazarus out of the tomb where he had been dead for four days.

Now, as he returns to Jerusalem, the Gospel of John immediately introduces as representatives of the whole world “some Greeks”, that is the only way they are referred to – “”some Greeks,” who are seeking Jesus.

These Greeks are probably Greek-speaking Gentiles who have become proselytes to Judaism, or perhaps are still only “God-fearers,” Gentiles who respect the tenets of monotheistic Judaism without yet becoming full converts to the faith. They are on their own pilgrimage to Jerusalem during this Passover festival when, probably as a result of Lazarus’s healing, they seek out Jesus.

Even as the Pharisees and the established elders of Judaism are rejecting Jesus and starting to plot against him, the Gentile mission is beginning. Indeed, the Gentiles are there before him now hoping to listen deeper, hoping to draw closer to God through him.

The Temple authorities have not heard the same sound of compassion and love. Perhaps those words have been drowned out by their own needs and desires, their biases, or their inability to imagine God doing something new in the world, or even in their own lives.

So, each group of people has—in their own way—paid attention to what God was doing in the world. Each group has made a decision about Jesus and who he is, and how they will regard him. That is where it is, that is *what* it is.

In this season of Lent, we, too, are reminded of the way in which God has spoken and is still speaking to us. Indeed, we are called upon to be truthful to ourselves about our relationship with God. Are we willing to listen? Are we willing to the hard work of discernment in order to follow God’s voice? Or will we wait and hope for a better deal that only corroborates our own desires? Or will we wait for Mephistopheles?

Either way, the gift of free will asks us to make a choice. And as we do, my prayer for myself and for all of us is that we will choose God’s ways over our own, and that when we do not, we will remember God’s astonishing mercy, and find our way back. May this be so.

Amen.