



## Sermon of November 21, 1999



### Rev. Mark Trotter

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

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### "THIS IS THE DAY"

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Matthew 6:25-34

Because this is Thanksgiving Sunday, the Sunday before the national holiday, I thought it would be appropriate that we examine that familiar phrase, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," from the 118th psalm, which we recited this morning.

Let me begin by suggesting a thesis. And that is, that we have something to do with determining the quality of the day. Now I have some reluctance to say that because I know that there are things that happen to us, forces outside of us over which we have no control. But I find that evidence intriguing for the thesis. For instance, I bet you know people that you would never ask, "How are you feeling?" because you know what they would say. You get an "organ recital" from them. They'll tell you about all their operations and how bad things are going for them. Some of those people, if you don't ask them, they'll ask you, "Why didn't you ask me how I am

feeling today?" They are always in misery. They have sort of a low-grade malaise all the time. And you wonder, has what happened to them shaped their attitude, or has their attitude shaped the way they see the things that happen to them?

There is a story about a barber who had a negative attitude about all things. A man came to his shop, got in the chair. He said he was going to Europe in a few days. The barber asked, "Where are you going?" He said, "First, we are going to go to London." The barber interrupted him, and said, "That's a terrible place. It's dirty, noisy, too expensive. You won't like it there in London. Where else are you going?"

"We are going to go over to Paris."

"Well Paris is worse. The people there are really very rude. You won't like it in Paris. Where else are you going?"

"Well then we are going to fly down to Rome."

"Oh, Rome is worst of all. The food is terrible. Whatever you do, don't visit the Vatican. The lines are too long. And don't think you are going to see the Pope either, because the Pope is not accessible. And even if you do, you won't understand a word he says, because he doesn't speak English."

Well the man went on his trip. He returned to the barber for another haircut. The barber asked, "How was your trip?"

He said, "London was great. It was the most exciting city. Prices were really quite reasonable. Paris was a beautiful city, very hospitable, everyone was kind to us. And Rome was the perfect climax to our trip. Everything was wonderful. We went to the Vatican, and even had an audience with the Pope. There weren't any crowds there at all. It was like a private audience with the Pope. And he spoke to each of us personally, and in English. Then he had me kneel, placed his hand on my head, and gave me a blessing. Then he leaned forward and spoke into my ear, in perfect English, "You have a lousy haircut."1

We know people who are always complaining. They have a negative attitude about everything. Everything is going to be bad, nothing is going to turn out right. You wonder if the things that have happened to them have shaped this attitude, or has their attitude shaped the way they see the things that happen?

Actually it's an old philosophical argument. Do we see the world as it is, or do we see the world as our senses have shaped it? We know, for instance, that our vision is limited. We don't see as well as many animals. We don't see as well as hawks, and we don't hear as well as dogs. We wonder if we had sharper eyesight, keener hearing, would we see the world differently?

The conclusion of philosophy is that our means of perception, our sense organs, determine the way we see the world. So we don't see the "thing in itself." That's the philosophical term. We don't see the "thing in itself." We see what our sense organs allow us to see.

Besides that, our ideas shape the way we see. So does our knowledge, our prejudices, and our

fears. There are people who look at a work of art, or an historical place, or some phenomenon of nature, they just pass right by it. They won't even notice it. But others will come up to it, be stopped in their tracks, and moved to tears at the beauty of what they have seen. I have been on guided tours in museums and have had the story of a painting explained to me. For the first time I have been able to appreciate what that painting means. Or on an historical tour with a guide, I have learned about things that otherwise I would have just passed by and not noticed at all.

It is the same way with persons. You look at someone, and your knowledge, your upbringing, your class, your fears, your prejudices, are going to determine what you see. But you get to know that person, you get some knowledge, some personal experience with that person, and you will see them differently.

So I think we can say that what's inside of you is going to determine the way you see the world out there. Jesus knew that. That's why when he taught, he said, "Let those with eyes to see, see; and let those with ears to hear, hear," because he knew that there were people so immersed in their own concerns, so terrified by their own fears and prejudices, so absorbed in their own expectations of who he should be, that they could not hear a word he said.

So maybe you do have something to do with the way the day will go, because the world out there is shaped by what is inside here. If that's true, then maybe, if you believe, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," it will affect your day, it will make a difference. So let's look at what it means to believe, "This is the day the Lord has made."

First, if this is the day the Lord has made, that means you don't have to. You're not finally in charge of this day. So whether it will be a good day or a bad day, how it will end up is not entirely up to you. "This is the day the Lord has made." Not you!

It is pretty well established that those who are burnt out are that way as a result of carrying too much burden upon themselves. Generally they are the people who think, "It's all up to me." They carry a load that is too heavy for one person to carry, because they really don't believe that other people are capable of doing it.

That's a form of playing God. If you are God, and things don't go the way you planned, then it's the end. If you are God, and you can't pull this off, then "that's all she wrote." There is no one else who can come to help you, if you are God. That's why for some people, failure is always apocalyptic. It is the worst thing that could ever happen. They say, it's the end of the world. And that's the way they act.

But if I believe in God, if I believe that God is the creator, and not me, then maybe I can stumble, and err, and fail, and the world won't come to an end, because this is the day the Lord has made, and not me.

Here is another philosophical question. Is the creation fixed, immovable, unchanging? Or is it moving, evolving, and changing?

A long time ago, in the Middle Ages, they believed the world was fixed and unchanging. I think

they saw it that way because they had some stake in seeing it that way. They wanted it to be that way because they had structured a hierarchical society. God was at the top, then the kings, the patricians, the landowners, and then everybody else. About ninety-five percent of the rest of the people were below them in this hierarchical structure. They thought that was the way God created things to be. Isn't that wonderful. This is the way things should always be, so the world in their eyes was static and fixed, immovable. It would never change.

Then Copernicus and Galileo came along, and forced people to see the world differently. They said, the earth moves. It was a different way of seeing things. For the first time people saw the world differently. Pretty soon everyone saw it. The world changes, it moves, it evolves.

Well almost everyone saw it. A lot of people didn't see it. A lot of people, I think, still don't see it. A lot of those people are religious people. You notice when all of this hit the churches, about 150 years ago with the onslaught of Darwinism, they started building churches that looked like fortresses. Did you ever notice that? A lot of us were raised in those churches. They had these towers with turrets at the top, so you could shoot people from them, I guess. They used big stones to construct the churches. They looked like fortresses. You expected to see a moat and a drawbridge around it.

Architecturally those churches were saying, we are not changing. We are defending the world as it has always been. It's immovable. It's static. It's not going to change. But the world just kept changing, because God is always creating, and recreating.

Genesis says that God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day he rested. It doesn't say that he created the world in six days, and on the seventh day he stopped. It says, he rested. So I say we can assume that on the eighth day, he started in again.

I point out to you that the "eighth day of creation" is a wonderful metaphor the Church uses for the Resurrection. Saturday is the seventh day. Jesus was resurrected on Sunday. So the Church said that Sunday is the eighth day of creation, because God recreated the world in the resurrection of our Lord, and those who believe in him, live in the new world. Paul said to the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

God is always creating new life. That is why good can come out of evil. That is why new life can come from tragic events, because God is always creating out of the stuff of this world. That is why spring always follows the death of winter, because God is always creating. That is why you can't say, "This is going to be a terrible day." You don't know that, because the outcome finally doesn't belong to you. You can't say, "This tragedy that has happened to me has ended my happiness." Nor can you say, "Things are never going to get better." Nor can you say, "My life will never change." Because if you believe in God, then you believe that God is always creating. And if God is always creating, then there are always possibilities for you.

I mentioned there are people you don't want to ask "How are you?" because of the fear of hearing what they are going to say, but you've had the experience of visiting somebody who has really had terrible things happen to them. You get in touch with them to express your concern.

You are amazed at their attitude. You go there hoping maybe you can help them, and you leave

feeling better about the human race.

That's the way Paul was. I am inspired by Paul's letter to the Philippians. He's in jail. He's not going to get out. The Philippians send him a letter and a gift of concern, sent it with Epaphroditus, an expression of their love and concern for him. The letter to the Philippians is his thank you letter back to them. In it is this phrase. "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really been a good thing, because it has helped to advance the Gospel."

"This is the day the Lord has made." So someone greater than you is in charge of this. Which means, you don't have to be.

The other thing that I want to point out about this phrase is that it says that today is all there is. God hasn't created tomorrow. "This is the day" God has created. In fact I really believe that God hasn't even started to worry about creating tomorrow yet. So why should you?

That's the point of the Sermon on the Mount. The phrases that were read to us today were from Matthew: "Consider the birds of the air: they don't worry about where their food is going to come from tomorrow. They just live for today. Consider the flowers: they don't worry about what they are going to wear tomorrow. Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like any of these." So why do you worry about tomorrow? Let tomorrow worry about itself. For this is the day. God hasn't created tomorrow yet.

We read the Matthew version of this passage, which is in the Sermon on the Mount. Luke doesn't have a Sermon on the Mount. But he takes the same teachings of Jesus and puts them at the conclusion of the Parable of the Rich Fool. The rich fool is a man who kept building bigger and bigger barns, and then he died. He was foolish because he spent all his time preparing for tomorrow, and tomorrow never came. There never was a tomorrow. Tomorrow is not God's creation. Tomorrow is our imagination. We dream about tomorrow. But God creates this day. "This is the day."

The invention of the mechanical clock was a wonderful thing. I marvel at it, to see the beautiful intricacy of the mechanics of the clock. It is just an amazing instrument, especially those they built hundreds of years ago when they first invented the clock. It has become an essential tool for efficiency.

Some people think they are good for preachers too. There is no clock up here in this pulpit, but I have been in churches where there is a clock in the pulpit. My last church there was a clock in the pulpit. I was there when they built that church. They asked me if I had any specifications for the pulpit. I was pleased at that. I said, "Yes. Make it big." That's all I asked for was to make it big.

When it was finished and installed, though the sanctuary wasn't complete yet, I went into the building to examine the pulpit. It was wonderful. It was big. It had an adjustable desk, so you could raise it to the height of an average adult male. But there, embedded in the pulpit, was a clock: immovable, fixed. I couldn't take it out. I said, "I didn't ask for this." They said, "We know."

So I know congregations think that clocks are good things, especially for preachers. But they teach us something, something that may not be good for us. They teach us that time is a progression of minutes into infinity. So we think of eternity as an infinite duration of time, a long, long, long, long time.

When we read in the New Testament that Christ has come to give us eternal life, that is what we think of. We think that Christ has come to make it possible for us to live for a long, long, long time. But in the New Testament, eternal life is not a matter of duration, it is a matter of quality. Eternal life is what happens when time is suspended.

Have you ever had an experience that you wished would never end? Did you ever have a time when you forgot about the time, and you were surprised, and you said, "Look what time it is! Where did the time go?" Time stops, and you wish it would never end.

That's what the New Testament means by eternal life. It is time suspended. It is when there is no regret about the past, and no fear or anxiety about the future. There is only this day, this moment, which the Lord has made.

I'll tell you a parable. An American was down in Mexico, on one of those beautiful beaches, near a village. He came upon a fisherman coming up with his boat onto the beach. He got out, unloaded his catch, just one fish. The American asked him how long it took him to catch that fish. He said, "Not very long. It doesn't take me long at all." Then he said, "Why didn't you stay out longer and catch some more fish?" He said, "Because this is sufficient for my family today."

The American asked him, "What do you do with the rest of your day?" He said, "Well, I sleep late, I fish a little, I come home and play with my children, then I take a siesta with my wife, then later in the afternoon my wife and I go with our children to the village. I sip a little wine, talk to my friends, and play the guitar. I have a very full and busy life."

The American said, "Listen. I can help you. I have an MBA from Harvard, and I can help you. If you spend more time fishing, you can catch more fish, sell them, and buy a bigger boat. In time, with more earnings, why you would be able to buy a lot of boats. In fact, you could have a fleet of boats. Then in time, with enough earnings, you wouldn't have to sell your fish to somebody else. You could put a cannery right here on this beach and process your own fish. Pretty soon you could get out of here. You could live in Mexico City, or Los Angeles, or someplace like that. Then pretty soon you would have enough money to be a wealthy man."

The Mexican asked, "How long will this take?"

He said, "Maybe fifteen or twenty years."

The Mexican asked, "Then what?"

He said, "Then you can retire, move to some beautiful spot. You can sleep late, play with your children, take a walk into the village and be with your friends."<sup>2</sup>

"This is the day."

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

*1 Thanks to Bill Ritter.*

*2 Ed Hansen passed this story on to me.*

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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