

PANDEMIC STOICISM

1/3/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)

Christmas 2 (B): Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Psalm 84:1-8; Luke 2:41-52

Do you know much about Stoicism? I'm talking about the ancient Greek philosophy founded on the idea that the wise live in harmony with Divine reason. This isn't our contemporary idea of being "stoic," where a person doesn't show any emotions, no matter the circumstance.

Rather, ancient Stoicism is more like the Serenity Prayer used by 12-step programs: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Maybe some of you have read the book, *The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient*. I heard the author, William Irvine, interviewed recently, and he highlighted some techniques we might practice for a more peaceful existence. The most basic tenet of Stoicism, as in that Serenity Prayer, is to only concern ourselves with what we can control. If it's out of our control, there's no use worrying about it.

Irvine spent some time describing a related tenet, which I found very intriguing in light of our current pandemic circumstances. He referred to this tenet as the "Good Old Days" phenomenon, explaining that at any point in our lives—whatever is happening—that might just be the thing that we look back on, a few years later, and ask, "Weren't those the good old days?"

And—if you think about it—he's got a point. While many people around the globe are suffering incredibly, most of us at St. Andrew's are simply putting up with annoying Stay-at-Home Orders and feeling exhausted from being on Zoom several hours a day. But, I'm pretty sure there are things we'll look back on about this COVID-era with nostalgia. Once we all start commuting back to offices, miles from our homes, for instance, I bet we'll say, "Don't you miss the good old days when we wore our pajama bottoms all day long, and only had to walk as far as the dining room table to make it to work on time?"

Or when the kids are all back in multiple school, sporting, and theater events, and there's just one family member eating all alone at the kitchen counter at a time, and we'll say, "Don't you miss the good old days when the whole family ate together because we couldn't go anywhere?"

Reading this morning's story of Mary and Joseph searching for their adolescent son, in the middle of a pilgrimage, I can't help but think: "I bet they were missing the good old days when Jesus was an infant—or even a toddler—when he was completely reliant on them, and couldn't just wander off to go study with his spiritual teachers."

And, later, when Jesus is out dangerously defying religious and political authorities, maybe Mary and Joseph will look back on this time in the temple, as the good old days, when he was just studying instead of creating a revolution. It's all a matter of perspective, right?

This story—inserted into our Christmastide lectionary—can seem a little out of place. We just greeted the Baby Jesus last week, and next week on the Feast of Epiphany, we'll encounter

the Magi, who will have followed the bright star to the manger scene. But this week, we jump into Jesus's growing-up years.

It seems that the creators of the lectionary wanted to remind us that this isn't just any child who was born. There's also a tradition of having the destined child claim his future leadership in an exchange with an older mentor—think of Moses and Samuel. Additionally, this story moves the revelation of Jesus's divinity along from first the Angel Gabriel making the proclamation to Mary; to Elizabeth blessing the soon-to-be-born Christ-child; and finally, to Jesus, himself, proclaiming he is the Son of God.

Furthermore—even though the passage tells us that Jesus does, in the end, still obey his parents, at this point in his life—Jesus is introducing the idea that his loyalties will far exceed biological family obligations. So, this story helps us look beyond the simplistic “good old days” of established bloodlines.

The passage from Ephesians also stresses this: that God's love is all inclusive and far-reaching. Back in that early church setting, Jewish Christians were arguing about whether Gentile Christians could be considered “fully Christian” or not. So, this letter demands the infighting stop, because this is God's plan, not a decision for humanity. We are all adopted into God's family. We all belong to God.

At the same time, lest we be too quick to run toward the New Year—and, because as I said, next week we'll return to the manger scene with the Magi arriving—we might practice another tenet of Stoicism. Similar to the “Good Old Days” idea, this tenet suggests, occasionally, viewing people and activities, in our lives, as if this might be the last time we talk to a certain friend or get to walk on a particular trail.

Imagine how much more we would appreciate those moments, if we thought it might be the last time. So, during Christmastide, we might hold onto the Christ-child image a little longer, appreciating the Good News located in a vulnerable baby, knowing that this will be the last time we do so for another year.

From that place, we might practice the cycle of giving and receiving as outlined in Ephesians. We have been given this amazing gift of God coming among us, and the proper response is gratitude. The epistle describes it this way:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which Christ has called you.

So, as we continue to work our way through this pandemic and find ways of staying resilient along the way, the same tenants of Stoicism apply to our faith journey; there will be rough spots and rocky roads, but Christ is with us, and we are with each other. Let us savor these times—these times that will soon become the good old days—practicing gratitude, and proclaiming the inclusiveness of God's love.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself

to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
"Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel."
See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame, those with child and
those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.
Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,
says the LORD.

Psalm 84:1-8

1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
- 6 They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
- 7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; *
hearken, O God of Jacob.
- 8 Behold our defender, O God; *
and look upon the face of your Anointed.

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Luke 2:41-52

The parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem every year for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to

search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.