

**“Thanksgiving for Family Traditions”**

**Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 7:1-15**

**First Sunday in Advent**

November 27, 2005

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

Imagine the perfect table set for a feast. The table service is stylishly appointed with candles and pressed linens and polished silver. The turkey is moist and tender. The stuffing is seasoned perfectly – not too mushy, not too dry. The vegetables are perfectly prepared just the way everyone likes: fluffy potatoes, fresh greens, golden corn. The gravy melts in your mouth. The bread is yeasty and soft.

And the pies – oh, the pies – they are at least as good as Grandmother ever made. Flaky crusts. Savory ingredients. Apple and pecan and pumpkin and chocolate pies.

Now imagine that around this picture perfect table and fastidiously prepared food sits a company of people who finish this exquisite meal, but as they push their chairs from the table, they are still feeling starved. Their stomachs are full perhaps. But their souls are empty. Their hearts are heavy. Their spirits are dry.

I hope nobody had that kind of Thanksgiving dinner last week.

But we all know people who have had this kind of Thanksgiving, don't we? All the traditional appointments were there. But the relationships around the table were a bit tense. Maybe we don't know them personally. But we've seen them on stages and movie screens – families with a Norman Rockwell portrait of Thanksgiving. But their relationships are strained and their celebrations are shallow.

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**We are thankful for family traditions, but Jesus points to a deeper issue here in Mark's gospel.**

Jesus and his disciples grew up in a tradition that adhered to strict rules about food and family rituals. *How to eat. What to eat.* That kind of thing.

And it wasn't about pleasing the relatives or making the cover of *Gourmet* magazine. It was about delighting in God.

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If you have Jewish friends who keep a kosher kitchen, then you are familiar with some of the traditions that Jesus and the disciples were expected to keep 2000 years ago. There were rules about how animals are to be slaughtered for meat. There were rules about food combinations.

A kosher kitchen would never serve meat and milk on the same plate or even in the same meal. You would never find Beef Stroganoff on the menu at a kosher deli. You would never be offered a milkshake with your hamburger. Some of these rules came from The Holiness Code found in Old Testament books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy. And some come from other Jewish sources.<sup>1</sup>

These rules were about God initially, but they became more. They became *traditions* connecting family and faith. Jewish mothers taught their daughters the proper way to wash their “cups and pots and bronze kettles.” Jewish fathers taught their sons the importance of washing their hands before eating with them. But without God, none of it makes any sense.

I’ve shared before that we have family friends whom we love very much but we just don’t understand them. The wife in the family is culturally Jewish and she keeps a strict kosher kitchen. But she doesn’t believe in God. The whole purpose for keeping kosher was to please God in the Old Testament, and yet this friend keeps kosher without God. It doesn’t make sense to us.

And yet all of us do this sort of thing. We go through the motions of spiritual activity. But we forget that it’s all about pleasing God.

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You can’t really tell this from our reading of this passage in English, but the grammar in Greek makes it is clear that what the disciples were eating with dirty hands here was the bread that Jesus miraculously fed to the 5000 from five “starter” loaves of bread.<sup>2</sup> One scholar calls it “the magic bread” but it seems better called “the miraculous bread.”

Jesus had just performed a miracle that was so breathtaking that it’s repeated more than any other miracle in the gospels.<sup>3</sup> But the Pharisees were less concerned with the fact that 5000 hungry people were satisfied with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish, than the fact that the disciples had eaten their share without first washing their hands.

They lifted up the strictest interpretation of the cleanliness rules: not only were the Jewish leaders – the Pharisees – required to wash, but “all the Jews” were supposed to eat only after “thoroughly” washing their hands.<sup>4</sup> *What?*

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<sup>1</sup> Handwashing rules cannot be found in the Old Testament, but can be found in the Mishnah, written about 200 AD. The Mishnah is commentary on the Hebrew scriptures.

<sup>2</sup> See Mark 6:34-44

<sup>3</sup> The Feeding of the 5000 is also found in Matthew 14:13-21, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13. The Feeding of the 4000 is found in Mark 8:1-9 and Matthew 15:32-38.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars believe that “average Jews” were not required to wash like those central to life in the Temple (i.e. priests and scribes). But there is also archaeological evidence that ceremonial washing was common practice for Jews in all walks of life, according to Susan Haber (2003). See

<http://users2.ev1.net/~turton/GMark/GMark07.html>

Jesus responded by pointing out that the Pharisees often missed the point of these rules. The rules were for honoring God, not for making people jump through hoops in order to live their lives. Jesus put it much more eloquently:

***You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.***

Or in the words of the prophet Isaiah quoted here:

***This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.***<sup>5</sup>

Jesus went on to press the Pharisees and scribes on other ways they twisted the rules for their own purposes.

We've all heard of the Fifth Commandment: *Honor thy father and mother.*<sup>6</sup> In Jesus' day (and one would hope today), there was the expectation that adult children would support their needy parents financially in their later years. But the Pharisees had established a tradition called "Corban" which literally means "offering."<sup>7</sup> "Faithful Jews" according to the Pharisees, were the ones who gave all their extra money, not to help support their elderly parents, but as "Corban" – an offering to the temple. As Jesus pointed out, they were trying to trump God's most ancient and fundamental law with a tradition of their own making.

Traditions, of course, are a good thing. . . except when they aren't.

Diana Butler Bass teaches over at the Virginia Theological Seminary, and she tells the story of coordinating an Advent program at her church, a large Episcopal congregation here in Alexandria. Her charge was to create a program to prepare families for the season of Advent – preparing spiritually for the coming of Jesus. She was given full use of the classrooms throughout the church building.

But as she was making plans, she learned that there was a long-standing custom in that congregation involving the Women's Group and an annual craft sale they held each year to raise money for their organization. They had been given full use of the building for the previous years and of course, they expected that this would always be the case. When Dr. Bass shared that she would need the classrooms for *classes*, it did not go well.

"Your whole problem," said the head of their Women's Organization, "is that you don't care about tradition." Dr. Bass was shocked. Of course she cared about tradition. She had a PhD in church history! It's just that her time frame for tradition went farther back than the 1950s. She was trying to go back to an even earlier tradition – the tradition of preparing for the Messiah.

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<sup>5</sup> The Septuagint version of Isaiah 29:13.

<sup>6</sup> See Exodus 20:12.

<sup>7</sup> In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.

She tried to explain that while it might have been a church “custom” to hold a craft fair each year, it was a church “tradition” to observe Advent. Traditions, she writes, are more than human inventions. They connect us to our deepest beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

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Jesus’ point in his argument with the scribes and Pharisees was that some traditions are merely human creations. But the most meaningful, most ancient practices were created by God.

Many of our traditions were initially intended to remind us of God’s place in our lives. When Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving as a national holiday in 1863, he decreed the day as an occasion to stop work, to gather with loved ones, and to thank the God blessed them even in the throes of war.

Today, perhaps Thanksgiving is not Thanksgiving without turkey and pumpkin pie, and shopping on Black Friday. But know that – in its beginning – it was about God.

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This day marks the beginning of Advent – those four weeks before Christmas when we shop and decorate and sing carols and send cards and hang wreathes on our doors. But know that – in its beginning – it was about God. And it still can be about God.

And if we want these weeks to be spiritually fulfilling, it <i>has</i> to be about God.
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When I’m counseling couples who are planning to be married, I always ask them about the family traditions they grew up with, and whether or not they have discussed what traditions they’ll choose for their own family, especially in terms of Christmas. People seem especially sentimental about Christmas.

I’ve seen lips quiver over the realization that the groom would be happy with an artificial tree while *it can never really be Christmas* for the bride if the tree isn’t a cut Frazier Fir. I’ve seen signs of unrest when the subject came up about opening presents on Christmas Eve versus opening presents on Christmas Day.

Before my husband Fred and I were married, he told me that the tradition in his family. In the weeks before Christmas, there was no tree set up, no stockings, no Christmas carols on the stereo. His family abstained from any Christmas preparations during all the weeks prior to Christmas.

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<sup>8</sup> Bass, Diana Butler, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. The Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia, 2005, pages 37-39.

When he and his sisters went to sleep on Christmas Eve night after the late service at church, there was not a shred of tinsel, not a single sign of Christmas in the house. But when they woke up bright and early, the tree was miraculously set up and decorated, the presents were wrapped and lying under it, the stockings were up and filled, and the windows were brightened with candles and trimming. Apparently, after the children went to bed – about midnight – the parents went to bed for about an hour, and then arose to sneak out and cut down a tree, decorate it, and deliver the most enchanting Christmas – out of nothing – that they could possibly deliver. The initial point was to stress that Advent led up to Christmas but was not Christmas.

Knowing that Fred and I were facing a future in which Christmas Eve would be spent working in churches, we easily agreed not to repeat that particular family tradition if we wanted to stay married and sane.

But there were others that were treasured and emotionally crucial and non-negotiable. The reality of it all – however – is that no tradition matters if it's simply about keeping tradition with no inspiration, no spiritual connection, no meaning that runs deeper than our own family heritage.

**There is a heritage we all share with roots that run to the core of our existence.** We are all God's people.

From the beginning, God has tried to connect with human beings, and when we've become distracted by the inventions of our own making, *we sometimes find ourselves longing.*

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The prophet Isaiah tells of a time when the Jews ached for their traditions. But as exiles in Babylon, they had lost the ability to keep the traditions of their faith. They were returning to their city in ruins and their temple in ruins.

They didn't care about meaningless rituals anymore. They didn't care about chastising each other or making each other jump through theological hoops to belong. They simply wanted God to speak to them. They were *begging* God to speak to them.

Yes, the LORD had allowed the Babylonians to overtake them because they'd been unfaithful. They had listened to everyone but God. And now, on their way home, all they wanted was for God to come to them again.

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .*

If only God would come in a big way! With fire! An earthquake! Something obvious. But God, of course rarely comes in an obvious way. Once, about 2000 years ago, God came in the form of a homeless child.

God had tried to connect with the people through prophets and kings, but it hadn't worked. These ancient people were, like us, easily distracted. And listen to this very real confession by Isaiah:

*We have all become like one who is unclean.*

It's not just that our hands are dirty. Our souls are dirty. We've spent most of our energy working toward building something that fails to realize our deep, existential need to make that holy connection. Without God, we are abysmally lost.

We find ourselves going through the motions of life without realizing that there is a most basic tradition we have overlooked: the practice of recognizing that life is about more than turkey and dressing, stockings and wreaths, shopping and spending, working and working some more.

The meaning of life has everything to do with something holy. Something bigger than you and me. And with this realization, we become unspeakably thankful for the human family and for all that is good in the world. These are the things God wants for us.

We live on a dangerous and cruel planet. But this is also the world in which God spoke – not with fire and tumult, but with a baby. God spoke through One who would show us a better way to live. One who would show us that relationships are more important than lists of rules – that rules are created to build relationships, not to strain them.

One is coming again who showed us that feeding the soul is at least as crucial as feeding the stomach, that caring for each other is more important than caring for structures – that structures are supposed to be tools to build community, not to diminish them.

Consider the family traditions you hold dear. Consider how you will spend your time preparing for Christmas. It will be possible to fit in all the right activities, to accomplish all the familiar traditions and still find ourselves longing for something deeper.

If we want a different kind of Christmas this year – to enjoy the holidays with a new rhythm that is more like a symphony of beauty than a frantic drumbeat, we need a different kind of Advent. Advent is a time to ask God to put us on the right path. It's a time to call on God's name. It's a time to expect something amazing. Isaiah called them "awesome deeds." Let's keep on the lookout *for awesome deeds* in these weeks to come.

And guided by the hand of the One who sent Immanuel, let's look for opportunities when we might be the purveyors of awesome deeds ourselves, in the name of Almighty God.

Let us pray:

*You are our Father, the Potter who formed us and molds us still. And yet we live as if we rule the world, or at least our own little corner of it. Remind us LORD that there are things we need to change if we are going to realize the awesome power of Immanuel. Slow us down. Remind us to look for the deeper meaning. Keep our traditions pure. We pray through Jesus who is coming again. Amen.*

What makes something special/holy/Christmas-y?

Is it the family tradition? Is it what pleases God?