

*My people shall never be shamed:*  
Abundance, Loneliness, the Finished Race and the Good Fight  
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First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.  
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Readings:

**Joel 2:23-32**  
**New International Version**

<sup>23</sup> Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. <sup>24</sup> The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. <sup>25</sup> "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you. <sup>26</sup> You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. <sup>27</sup> Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; *never again will my people be shamed*. <sup>28</sup> "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. <sup>29</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. <sup>30</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. <sup>31</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. <sup>32</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**  
**New International Version**

<sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. <sup>16</sup> At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. <sup>17</sup> But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. <sup>18</sup> The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

**Luke 18:9-14**  
**New International Version**

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like

this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts sustain us through pain and lead us toward loving kindness. *Amen.*

It takes humility and courage to share one's pulpit with others. To do so is a wonderful example for each of us of what it means to be a servant leader. So, thank you, Pastor Julie and Pastor Eric. It is a gift to be with you this morning.

My mother's family came several generations ago from peoples indigenous to Europe—the Netherlands, England, Scotland and Ireland. Among them were Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Quakers. My maternal grandparents were American Baptists and my grandfather, Ted Conklin, was a pastor who served churches throughout Upstate New York before working full time in the last chapter of his career for the New York State Council of Churches in Syracuse.

My father's family came several generations ago from peoples indigenous to North America and Africa, but I do not know the nations or countries with any more specificity. My paternal grandparents were members of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, and my grandfather, Louis James Willie, was a pullman porter and member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. My father remembered him saying: Baptists go by water; Methodists go by land. But when they get Heaven, they

shake each other's hands. So, as the descendent of both Methodists and Baptists, it's wonderful to be with you here today and to shake your hands!

[The German intellectual Hannah] Arendt celebrated deep thinking as a birthright and capacity of every human being, a pleasurable activity by which we can find our way to the meaning each and every one of us longs for in a life. For her, thinking and friendship were interrelated experiences. Thinking finds its home and purpose as it interacts with kindred spirits and teachers as well as strangers.

Krista Tippet, NPR's *On Being*

I am going to engage with you as friends and strangers in a bit of reflecting on the scriptures this morning. My only request is that you to take my questions home with you and introduce them to thoughts of your own. The pre-eminent and deeply respected scholar of comparative religion, Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God*, *A Short History of Myth*, and *The Case for God*, is my interlocuter this morning. I treat her ideas as if she is in conversation with me and she guides and inspires my observations and thinking. Armstrong offers priorities as we engage the scriptural readings of our religious traditions. There are three things<sup>1</sup> she encourages of us who consider ourselves religious, or spiritual or simply seekers.

The first is *to cultivate an awareness that the concept of God is something beyond our human perception of reality*. I would add that if we come to appreciate that God is beyond our human perception then it follows that we cannot possibly stand in

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<sup>1</sup> These three points are taken from an article that specified no author in the Harvard University *Gazette* November 29, 2007 in which a journalist paraphrased one of Armstrong's lectures. They are, however, arguments that Armstrong makes in other published work as well.

sure judgement of the ways that God is perceived by others. To acknowledge our limited view forces a coming to terms with our own humanity, humility and imperfection.

The second thing Armstrong hopes we will appreciate is that *religious truth is different from the pragmatic truth required by our everyday living*. We “must always approach religious truth with a mind-set completely different from the one used to approach truth in other disciplines,” she’s said. “The scriptures of religious truth, ‘are held in a ritual setting [and] in a mind-set that is different from normal life.’” We come to understand things in the rituals of religious practice differently than the things that we know from our study of science and literature. This different kind of knowing is not irrational, but it is non-rational, extra-rational, motivated by a metric outside of rationality; it is an embodied knowing, knowing that comes from repetition in community rather than knowing gained from study.

Armstrong has used the example of the Quran to illustrate her point. Westerners who try to read the Quran from cover to cover, she laments, are completely missing the point. “By design, the sacred text of Islam, whose very name means recitation, was meant to be listened to. It’s the very process of hearing the words, the Arabic chanted repeatedly, that brings one to that contemplative state.”

“If you listen to this scripture chanted in a wonderful way throughout a lifetime, certain verbal echoes start occurring to you ... rather like variations in a piece of music, that add new depth and new subtlety and new layers.” Certainly,

many of us can see similarities to repeated catechisms, chants, prayers, psalms, or hymns. [added spontaneously: For example, I found myself welling up with emotion this morning to hear the hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” It had been one of my maternal grandmother’s favorite hymns and I hear, remember, feel her voice singing it and feel that memory in my body.]

Armstrong’s third encouragement is to attempt to evaluate the original meaning of religious doctrines in order to apply their lessons in today’s world. This may be very challenging for those of us who learned that scripture is “the word of God” and, therefore, completely immutable and infallible. It is the reason many people have been attracted to religious traditions that profess to have one truth that invites no ambiguity, no discussion, and no interpretation. It is also the reason that many people have left their religious traditions, if there is no room for ambiguity, no room for argument, interpretation or the engagement of our minds.

Here, Armstrong invites us to use our rational minds, to engage the disciplines of literary study and history, sociology and anthropology, psychology and archaeology. We need not shy away from the historical context in which the scriptures of every and any religion were written. In fact, we *must* understand them for the time in which they were written—to the best of our abilities—so that we understand their meaning for that time and decide for ourselves whether and how to pull the spirit of that wisdom into the needs of the present day.

“In our studies, in our Bible groups, in our sermons,” Armstrong has said, “[we must] look back at how some of these [doctrines] evolved and then see if we can analogically apply that spirit to our own time.” I love that Armstrong acknowledges that we’re human animals, and part of what makes us human is that we need to figure stuff out. We’re curious and we’re always seeking to understand; it’s important to most of us to make things right. So, let’s take a look at today’s readings.

This morning’s reading from Joel reminds us of God’s abundance. Through Joel, God promises: Your threshing floors will be full of wheat, your vats will overflow with oil and wine, you will have plenty to eat, and I will pour out my spirit on you. I will make up for all those lean, mean, years of locusts.

This is one of those passages that biblical scholars tell us may have been written by more than one person. Parts of it focus on God’s benevolence; other parts on God’s judgement. Scholars have even debated whether the reference to locusts is symbolic of wars or pandemics or actually refers to locusts. Also up for debate is when Joel lived: somewhere between the third century and the ninth century before the common era. That doesn’t narrow it very much!

Joel reminds his followers: Your life is going to be so good that beyond locusts and drought and starvation, God makes you a promise that gets at one of the most important things—that you will never be shamed again. We learn what is important to the people he’s addressing: having enough to eat and living without shame or humiliation. But there’s a contract: with all of these wonders that will benefit you, you have to acknowledge that there is no other God.

Now, one doesn't make it a point of commanding one's followers not to follow any other god unless there are other competing religions around that are pretty darn sure that there are other gods. So even before knowing precisely when Joel lived, it is probably not surprising to you that scholars agree that he is a Jew living in a Greek land, a land with multiple gods.

There are references to God's grace, God's power to judge and this inherent contract: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, says Joel, will be saved. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, but my people will be delivered. That's a pretty heavy contract and it tells us a great deal about what was important to the people of the time.

The second reading from the Christian Testament is from Timothy. Timothy is also called Paul's Epistle to Timothy and is attributed to Paul. And, like the biblical scholars in disagreement about Joel, here, too, there is disagreement as to whether the passage that we heard today was written by Paul or one of his younger followers. Whether written by a disciple of Paul or Paul himself, the passages anticipate his coming death. Scholars know that Paul was arrested in what is modern day Turkey and brought to Rome, which already had a Christian subculture, where Paul was executed by its emperor Nero. In this passage, the author, reminds his readers that even in the loneliness of a righteous life, God is with us; even in the presence of the lion (allegorical or real), God delivers us; the reward is not only in the promise of an afterlife (or a heavenly kingdom) but in having stayed the course, having kept the faith, having run the race, having fought the good fight.

If this was indeed Paul writing, he had more than a bit to worry about: you remember that he began as Saul, a Greek-speaking Jew from Asia Minor who actively persecuted followers of Jesus until his awakening on the road to Damascus when he describes encountering Jesus as an apparition. At this dramatic seeing of Jesus, Saul knows that he must change his ways: he changes his name and alters his life with as much conviction as he had previously beaten-up followers of Jesus. So, when I say that Paul had more than a bit to worry about, I'm just acknowledging that he had, if not skeletons in his closet, a past about which he was not proud.

I just want to pause for a moment and to acknowledge the power of the archetypes in these two stories. Many if not most of us long for, even as we may fear, a righteous judge. The idea that God is a righteous judge has haunted the fevered night of generations and orients the hope of many more for the future; it promises a reward that lays within our grasp. The idea of God in the traditions that include Judaism, Christianity and Islam remake this idea of God over time from a stern disciplinarian or exacting parent into a compassionate and loving one. But it is good for us to remember that God is also understood by our fellow humans across the Earth as the ocean and mountains, as breath and birds, as multiple and fallible and wind and rain and sun.

Paul's letter to Timothy not only narrates the strength Paul gained from his faith but lays it out as a possibility for others: relying on God, the letter writer conveys, can offer us confidence in the face of fear, in the face of poor odds, in the face of certain failure.



These two passages—one from the Hebrew Bible and one from the Christian Bible—fit together like parts of a whole, the reading from Paul, being candid about the hard days of living a righteous life (“No one came to my support,” he laments, “Everyone deserted me”) while amplifying the promise made in Joel (being brought safely into the abundance of God’s favor). In this passage, the focus moves from the earthy relief of Joel’s description where everything’s gonna be alright, to the afterlife for which Paul hopes: even if it’s not alright on Earth, Paul assures himself and his followers, it will be alright later. When one has been arrested and is facing execution, as is the case with Paul when this letter was written, everything is clearly not going to be alright, at least not on Earth. And yet, this passage reveals resignation softened by the hope and expectation of reunion with God.

Chapter 18 from the Gospel according to Luke recounts a supposed parable from Jesus. And the message here is clear: we must seek genuine humility. Just in case you were as curious as I am, there’s also an argument about Luke and the authorship of this Gospel: not all scholars believe that the writings attributed to Luke were actually written by him. It is not clear whether Luke was a physician, as several scholars claim. Some even wonder, did Jesus even have a disciple named Luke? Why does his writing shift among various styles, never writing in the first person, but often writing in the third person and then occasionally in the second person?

While *we* won’t be able to reconcile these conundrums, we *can* appreciate why church leaders chose it to complete today’s liturgy: it’s message puts everything in perspective—whether it’s a time of plenty or a time of locusts, whether you perform devoutness, as Paul did, or you faithfully execute a job that is suspect, like the tax

collector, whether you're sure that you have been saved or you're about to be executed, the speaker recounts a parable certainly consistent with what we know of the historical Jesus: being truly humble is what counts.

I return to Armstrong's three encouragements:

- to appreciate that none of us understands the fullness of God, acknowledging that our perspectives are fragmentary at best and that even scripture only hints at a possibility that is larger than our human knowing;

- to give ourselves over to the rituals that take place in sacred gathering spaces where we enact them again and again in community, opening ourselves to the non-rational knowing of their repetition; and

- to investigate the context in which scriptures were written so as to glean the spirit in which they came about and discern whether and how to apply them to our contemporary moment.

I know that I am left with questions after digesting these readings.

- What if abundance and reckoning are not rewards or punishments or signals of judgement day?

- What if the rising temperatures and the melting ice, the disappearing animals, the annual forest fires and the expanding droughts are simply alarms – alarms desperately trying to wake us from the stupor of visiting the temple without genuine humility?

- What if Jesus's parable from Luke is telling us right now: if we are truly humble, we'll figure out together how to return to the abundance promised us?

Earlier this morning, I spoke with a few of you over breakfast about doing conflict with each other. Taking a deep breath, counting to five, stepping outside for a few minutes, and listening are all practical ways of taking a moment of tension, disagreement and argument in a new direction.

- What if the “lion’s mouth” is a metaphor for the worst of all conflicts, and the work that we do to find a new reaction is the deliverance we’ve been seeking?

- What if learning *how* to love each other, learning to listen to each other is actually what is meant by the good fight?

- What would righteousness look like if it were truly humble?

- How would we engage each other if our vats were full of wine and oil? Would we share them?

- If our refrigerators were full—if they are full now—how would God know that we are generous and compassionate?

- What do we do when our refrigerators are full but the air is full of locusts or Covid?

- If the streets are full of Proud Boys and Oath-keepers who are terribly ashamed and for whom promises have been relentlessly broken...What do our interventions look like then?

- When some loved ones are in the throes of addiction, or when others have died alone?

- How might we each imagine a heavenly kingdom—An afterlife with less pain and more joy? The continuation of this human life for those who come after us with

less pain and more joy? The life we are currently living on Earth with less pain and more joy?

For me, there has always been a tension between the scripture as literal and the scripture as literary. Karen Armstrong reminds all of us that we don't need to put ourselves in knots choosing one or the other: we have a responsibility to engage in rituals (including the rituals of reading scripture), because rituals invite us to a different plane; we come to know in our bodies and our hearts the resonance of poetry and song, chant and prayer in an embodied and extra-rational way.

She reminds us that we owe it to our human, curious, scientific, anthropological, literature writing, and appreciating selves to treat Biblical scripture as seriously as we treat any kind of writing. It was spoken or written by people, and those people, despite being conveyors of the wisdom traditions they represented, were of a certain time and place. It makes little sense to bend ourselves in knots trying to justify passages that describe the sacrifice of children by parents as evidence of loving God, passages that call for the stoning of adulterers, or that preach the imperative of slaves to obey their masters and wives to obey their husbands, as if we have not evolved to more capacious understandings of equity and justice, as if we do not have different values and live in different times.

But it also makes sense to engage those stories, to try to understand why they ended up in scripture. "Logos is science or reason," Armstrong reminds us,

Something that helps us to function practically and effectively in the world, and it must therefore be closely in tune and reflect accurately the realities of the

world around us. Mythos [is] about the discourse, [she writes,] stories about the more difficult aspects of our humanity, about for which there were no easy answers. Like the fact that we [...] get sick, that there are all kinds of questions about suffering and pain that concern us, and for this, people turned to mythos.

Armstrong reminds us that to be human is to be story tellers – to hold all of this at once: the partiality of something greater than ourselves, the rituals that allow us to transcend our daily lives, and the curiosity and study to offer context to a history that guides our contemporary life. Our forebears recognized, she tells us, that “mythos and logos... were not seen ... in competition with one another. People felt we needed both, and each had its particular sphere of competence...”

I would argue that it is when we pretend that what we read did not emerge from a particular time and place, then we are forsaking our God-given intellects to lose out nuance, ignoring our God-given curiosity to understand history, denying our God-given talent to appreciate context.

For Joel, it was the eclipse—*The sun will be turned to darkness*—that told of God’s awesome power. For us, it is time that we name the growing hole in the ozone that that is a powerful warning. Joel was speaking to a people who saw war in the past – migrants who had nonetheless become comfortable – who hoped and expected that things would only go well. So, Joel’s prophecies are gentle: continue to worship your one God. Another interpretation might be, even when you are living a life of

plenty, when wars and starvation and shame seem to be behind you, do not forget where you came from. Continue to practice your rituals and worship your God.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, his audience is different: he speaks to fellow followers who are persecuted, who have chosen a path that departs not only from the letter of scores and scores of laws that gave the Jewish people their distinction in a land that begrudges them, but that put love, forgiveness, kindness and curiosity above Jewish law, above Greek law, above Roman law. For these social movement followers, suffering was as likely as ecstasy to be one's experience. For Paul, facing his own mortality, another interpretation of his message might be: There is a reason beyond this moment for doing what's right, for doing what's good, for seeking the truth and treating others compassionately; you may not get there today, or tomorrow, but your faith will bear fruit you cannot see; the arch of the universe is long and it bends toward justice.

Luke's parable of the proud Pharisee and the humble tax collector pulls it all together: and one interpretation might be that right living can never only be performance; it is not for show, does not abide our judgement against others. In this parable, the tax collector does not stand in for the IRS. The tax collector stands in for the person who works for the emperor, the who collects monies not to distribute to make everyone's lives better, but to fill the coffers of the ruler. So, tax collector is someone who does the bidding of the ruler at the expense of the people. A person who knows that what they are doing is wrong, and yet who stands outside the sacred walls, wanting to be a better person, hoping to be a better person but so unsure of how to get there that he does not even cast his eyes in the direction of his God and

his judge. It is that person, so Jesus' parable instructs, who is most likely to be cracked open, to find his way toward a path of righteousness, to receive that depth of knowing beyond all knowing. That kind of openness, of genuine humility is what reveals to us again and again that our perspective is partial, that our work is never done, that since the moon is always turning to blood for someone on Earth, our compassion and good works are finally all we have for each other.

The threshing floors are not full for most of planet's people, though the planet has enough; the vats of oil and wine are empty, though they flow in certain rooms, in certain neighborhoods, for certain people; the moon is turning to blood and the sun is eclipsed by darkness and pain on the streets of Ukraine, and Chad, again in El Salvador, and even Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.

When the sun shines for some of us but burns others of us; when the seas provide luxury vacations for some of us but are rising and full of garbage for others of us; when the rage and anger, nihilism and spiritual exhaustion become a way of life, *who are we called to be in this moment? What are we called to do? Do the old metaphors of a God who rewards or punishes work for this us? What are the new ones?*

What I *do* know is that we've got a lot of work to do. To see and hear each other. I know my perspective is partial, but I do know to pause, to breathe deeply and slowly, to extend my hand. I've been taught to share my food, to visit those who are sick, and in prison, to tell the truth. I do know to wish compassion on all my fellow beings. I know that I am not able to do these things all of the time, and perhaps you are not either. But if you will pull me along, I will pull you, and, for every song that

we hear and sing, for every smile that comes our way, let's assume that we are receiving God's spirit poured into us as we pour out the best of our spirits on each other. Let us assume that this is God's mercy as we show each other mercy; let us have faith that something so much fuller and larger and broader and deeper and kinder, no matter what we call that, is helping us to know, know deeply, in our bodies and minds and our souls, a love and peace beyond our articulation but always available.

Amen. Amen.