

“Awe, Emmanuel, Intercessor”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:24b-28; Acts 2:14-24
May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday

On my mother-in-law’s refrigerator, next to a magnetic calendar from an insurance company, just below a recipe for broccoli salad, and a few inches above a shopping list is a square piece of paper with 18 point, *Times New Roman* font spelling out three simple sentences:

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

These words were written by author and journalist Michael Pollan. He offers them to his readers as words to hold onto, to take with them as they go out into a world filled with sugary drinks and so much fried goodness. Pollan has summarized his entire eating manifesto in these seven words, which I’m sure his publisher will tell you is the opposite of a writer’s job if selling actual books is the goal. Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it’s not great for the bottom line. I’m fully aware of the irony of a preacher pontificating about being short-winded. Fear not, there’s baptizin’ to do.

Of course, Michael Pollan has so much more to say in the book from which these lines come, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* and its predecessor *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. These reminders aren’t foolproof. They’re not perfect. They don’t encapsulate all of nutrition science and psychology. But the words he wants you to carry with you to the grocery store and the restaurant *are* simple and easy to remember:

Eat food. - Pollan’s point here is that if it wouldn’t be recognizable to your grandparents or great-grandparents as being, you know, *food*, it’s most likely highly processed and won’t do much for your hunger.

Not too much. - Just in my lifetime the portion size of everything has grown in leaps and bounds.

Mostly plants. - And, of course, the more heavily of a plant-based diet we follow, the more likely we are to be eating healthy.

I thought of this note on my mother-in-law’s refrigerator because of all the graduations this month. Many of you have joyfully attended high school and college commencements, those fantastically long and dull affairs punctuated by a wonderful spike in interest and pride and joy as your graduate’s name is called. If you’re really lucky, there’s a commencement address, in which some celebrity or someone decidedly un-well-known tries to offer graduates words to carry with them into the world beyond.

The scripture passages we read each week are set pretty far in advance. Judy and I had been working to find a date for her baptism until last Sunday. So it was only then that I discovered that these three texts would not simply be our Sunday morning lessons, but the words that we are given to hold onto and

carry with us as we make our way to the baptismal font. Unlike a commencement speaker, whose message is primarily aimed at the ones being celebrated, God's holy word comes to us all this morning. The sacrament of baptism is as much about us as it is about the one who receives the blessing. We baptize with great responsibility, making exciting, but solemn promises.

I'm going to ask you, the people of God:

Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Judy by word and deed, with love and prayer?

Will you encourage her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of Christ's church?

I hope you'll say yes to both. But first, consider what these promises mean as we see what we will carry with us to the font.

It strikes me that in these three texts — Paul's writing about the Spirit, Peter's Pentecost sermon, and the call narrative of the prophet Isaiah — we find very different experiences of God. They are all true and important and valid, but they are very different. And thanks be to God, because that's exactly how it is in a worshiping community.

A few weeks ago we talked about the things for which our spirits hunger, and I heard afterwards how you all come here with different needs, different hungers, different longings each week. We gather together and we bring our different experiences of God in our lives and our different personalities and our different learning styles and so we are moved by different ways of worshiping. And, yeah, for some of us those longings and experiences and what we find moving changes weekly.

There's a scene in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* in which a snooty Christian boarding school has filed into its chapel for worship. With the headmaster looking on, the chaplain (portrayed by Michael Palin) leads the congregation in prayer:

"Oh Lord, oooh you are so big. So absolutely huge.
Gosh, we're all really impressed down here I can tell you.
Forgive us, O Lord, for this, our dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery.
But you are so strong and, well, just so super. Fantastic. Amen."

I can't hear that comical prayer and not think of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah came to speak to a people who had forgotten and forsaken their covenant with God, with corruption and injustice running rampant. They were a people of unclean lips, and Isaiah is sent to them after this powerful, terrifying, awe-inspiring encounter with God. He sees God on a throne, but only up to God's waist. He hears the calling of the seraphim. He smells smoke. He feels the temple quake. He tastes a hot coal touched to his lips. Isaiah's experience is wild and the precise opposite of subtle. He meets a God who fills the space with power and strength and otherness.¹

¹ Commentary by Charles L. Aaron, Jr. at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3666

This is the experience of God that some of us have had while laying out under a star-strewn sky, feeling the weight of sacredness upon us. It is the power of God we might know in seeing something we can't explain — some force beyond ourselves that we can barely describe disturbing our world and bringing us to the ground. This is the God of heavy sobs of both joy and deep sorrow. This is the God of fire and cloud and storm and sheer silence.

We evoke awe in our worship — well, probably not enough! But awe resists planning and scheduling and manipulation. It is the sense of something bigger than us among us when we join together in a hymn of aching beauty, or when we sit in silence as the names of our beloved are read, or when Pat really lets loose with the thunder.

This is the God who tore the sky open at Jesus's baptism. And that same Spirit descends today as we baptize. The God of eternity and the universe, the immensity of thousands of years of covenant and billions of years of creation astoundingly focused on our small marble font and the beloved child of God who will kneel before it and on what we will say and do in those moments, and beyond.

We go from the God of might to the intimate God that Paul describes to the Romans. Here we find a God who pours out love in the *okayness* of our struggles, who understands that we do not know what to say in the face of a beautiful-but-brutal creation as we speak to the One who brings only goodness. Here God's voice doesn't boom and echo and scramble our circuits, but instead offers "sighs too deep for words." This is the God who finds us beaten down and world-weary and pulls us up on our feet, who finds us hanging by a thread and pushes us back onto the tracks. This is God who speaks for us when holiness catches in our throats and who comes to us in our weakness and steps into the breach between us and our losses and our failures and our disappointments.

If you've ever felt awkward in worship, you know this God. If you've gone for the high note on a hymn and come up just short and made a squeak-ful noise to the Lord, Paul is talking to you. If you've ever just had to sit silently because you just can't — and felt an audible sigh escape your mouth and your heart stretch open just a bit, you have felt this Spirit. And, as we try to do each week, when we ask impossible questions and refuse to make a path for easy answers, God is present, loving us and searching our hearts with us.

This is the God of a community motivated by curiosity. One of the things I tell folks who come to a new members class is that we don't have half of anything figured out beyond loving one another and trying to follow Jesus. The invitation at the font and at the table and every time we gather is to join in seeking understanding together. We don't promise answers you can put on a cross-stitched pillow, but we do promise to help one another in our weakness, when life has curved our shoulders and the tears are *right there*, we will remember our vows to let God's Spirit work through us in ways deeper than words can capture.

Peter wants the Pentecost crowd to know that the good news spreading in all these languages isn't a sign of wine o'clock, but of God's Spirit overwhelming them with the need to share the gospel. It is the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It's the story we know so well, the story we treasure, the story we encounter an impossibly large-yet-small piece of every Sunday morning. It's the story that causes us to prophesy to a broken world and to see visions of justice and dream dreams of peace. It is a story so compelling that we commit our lives to it. We commit not only to our role in the story of the people of God's new covenant, but to telling the story again and again. We tell of what God has done and what Jesus taught and who Jesus spoke to and how a miracle beyond our comprehension changed the world forever.

We sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, and then *Silent Night* and *Joy to the World*, and we sing of Christ's love and how we ought to respond, and we sing of how the world did respond — with exaltation and with conspiracy the world responded — and we sing funeral dirges. And then we are silent...until we must sing again, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today!* And we can't stop singing because this story of Emmanuel — God with us — moves us to great acts of compassion and bold declarations that we will stand with those on the margins as Christ did and if we stop singing we might start to weep.

We have a saving story, a liberating story, a story that inspires us *to be* in a different way. It is a story that brings us to the font today, as we commit ourselves to tell this story to and with one who is choosing to follow Christ. We re-commit ourselves to his way of grace and radical inclusion. In the ancient church, those who had prepared to be baptized kept vigil through the night into Easter morning and then physically turned from facing the west to the east to greet the rising sun. We join with the church through the millennia this morning in turning to encounter a God who wraps us in love and claims us as Christ's own and anoints us with a Spirit of fire and water.

From God's holy word we carry with us awe and a healthy dose of quaking holiness and comfort and sighs too deep for words and liberation and dreams and a push to magnify grace. We bring these each Sunday and we receive reminders of them as we pour out our hearts to God. And for our trouble, we get sent out to share them with the world.

In just a few minutes, we bring all of this to a fancy marble bowl with our decidedly un-fancy water and as that water is poured and prayers are said and promises are made and we splash a bit and anoint and bless, we see this God who cannot be adequately described. We recognize what God has done forever and ever in all places, and we recognize what God has done in loving our sister, one of God's own flock. We rejoice. And we, the community of the covenant, say to to God, "We see you, in part. Praise and thank you for what you have done to love us." We recognize in a newly baptized member the grace of God and the power of the Spirit and the love of Christ and we say to her, "There you are!" We recognize ourselves in the water and the promises and we know that we have come home.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might
be to our triune God forever and ever. Amen.