

November 25, 2018

TEXT: Jude 1–25

TITLE: Big Themes, Little Books: Holy Imperfections

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

(Opening Prayer)

This is your lucky day! Over the past weeks, we've been looking at small books of the bible. You've heard sermons from Jonah, Esther, 3 John, and Philemon. Today we're going to consider the book of Jude—the next to last book in the entire bible. In almost thirty years of ordained ministry I've never preached on Jude and I'd wager none of you has heard a sermon on Jude. So today's your lucky day!

Jude is a short letter written to a small group of churches around 90 CE. It was written to warn the church about false teachers—intruders who had weaseled their way into the congregation and were distorting the gospel. They are called ungodly, bombastic, divisive, whose very garments are filthy rags. The writer is warning the church to hold fast to their faith and steer clear of these malcontents.

Now, that brief summary of Jude doesn't make it sound so bad—but here's the catch. I'm not actually going to read it to you. Hopefully what I'll say about Jude will tweak your curiosity enough that you'll read it for yourself later. But I'm not reading it out loud this morning, because I'd have to devote the entire sermon time just explaining to you the metaphors used by the author. In the book of Jude there are references to stories that were well-known back then, but which won't mean much to any of you today: Stories about fallen angels taking human spouses. Stories about the archangel Michael battling with Satan over the body of Moses. References to obscure Old Testament events like when Balaam's donkey argued with him, or when the family of a man named Korah rebelled against Moses and he and all his relatives were swallowed up in a pit and sent down to the underworld—happy, lighthearted stories like that.

To even begin to understand all the references in Jude requires research and biblical scholarship and getting into the mindset of a young church fully expecting God's judgment to descend upon them at any moment. While I was thinking about all that, it led me to realize that the big theme in this little book wasn't actually something discussed in Jude itself; rather it was a different question: Given the fact that the bible contains history, poetry, gospels and letters from over a 2000 year period of time, how should we relate to the bible today? How do we, as modern, often skeptical practitioners of the Christian faith understand the bible today?

The novelist Gillian Flynn once said "*The world can be divided into the people who like to look under rocks and the people who don't want to look under rocks.*"¹ In response to my earlier questions, if you want to read the bible, you have to be willing to look under rocks. You have to be willing to read a holy book whose

wisdom is not handed to you on a silver platter, whose vocabulary and subject matter are not easily translated into our modern American context—and yet still trust that truth abides in those pages for each of us today.

Think about that for a moment. What were God's choices in giving us words of faith to live by? Well, God could have relied on oral tradition only—given us stories and rules that we would each have to memorize and pass down to our children. When I was a kid, my mother belonged to a church women's group called P.E.O. Members were not allowed to divulge what those letters stood for. My sister, brother and I thought it stood for "Presbyterians Eat Out." Anyway, this group also had a short creed that could never be written down. Every new member had to be taught it orally until they learned it by heart. My mother had a lousy memory. She ended up writing down the first letter of each word in the creed in her futile efforts to commit those lines to memory. Oral traditions and stories can be effective ways to pass along spiritual lessons, but they are too dependent on fragile human memories, like my mother's and most of ours, ever to be the foundation of a complicated religion.

Instead of oral tradition, God could also have handed down a perfect copy of religious instruction, similar to what followers of Islam believe happened with the Qur'an. Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel dictated the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad over a period of about 23 years between 609 to 632 CE. Unfortunately, to insist that the Qur'an is a perfect revelation from God means you have to turn a blind eye to scholarship that examines variant readings of the Qur'an (which do exist) and be willing to tell yourself that translating ancient Arabic ideas into modern English vocabulary is a straightforward process (which it is not). The Bible is not a perfect holy book for us. It is God-inspired but it was written by too many people over too many years for it to be worshiped as an inerrant text of totally perfect religious knowledge.

God wants us to turn over the rocks when we read scripture. God wants us to imagine what it is like to be in slavery and wander aimlessly for 40 years seeking a promised land, even if our lives are much different from that of the ancient Hebrews. God wants us to hear the voices of cranky prophets challenging the status quo around them—whether that was Jeremiah in a time of war or John the Baptist in a time of spiritual crisis—and imagine what those guys would say today. God wants us to picture ourselves as sheep willing to be led by a Good Shepherd and as lost sheep who've wandered off from a flock of 99 until a Savior finds us. God wants us to stop pretending we are all-wise by giving us a Christmas miracle—God-made-flesh—and an Easter miracle—Christ rising from the dead—so we can hold onto a sense of mystery and wonder in this modern world of rationality, statistics and cold, hard cash. That's also why God gave us little books like Jude—messy, complicated, obscure texts that ended up in our sacred scripture—so we'll never forget that Christianity is not simply a religion for 21st century Pittsburghers, but rather a revelation of good news given to all people for all time, as long as this old earth by God's grace continues to exist.

If we'd been handed a perfect book, it would have required that we be perfect too in order to be worthy of it. That we would be without sin, without flaw, handling a precious text with white-gloved hands and perfect, shining souls. And that's just not us. God knows it's not us. So God gave us a wonderful, messy, complicated, inspiring, healing book because that's precisely what we needed.

Pittsburgh native and acclaimed novelist Annie Dillard, near the end of her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, commented that so many of the creatures we see out in nature are imperfect. She walked about noticing how many daddy-long-legs spiders were missing one or two legs; how many birds had lost tail feathers or pigeons had lost toes; how many butterflies had bites taken out of their fragile wings as scars from narrow encounters with bird beaks and other predators. Dillard came to realize that physical wholeness is not something we have barring accident; rather physical wholeness is itself accidental. She wrote these beautiful words: *"I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead I am wandering about on a splintering wreck I've come to care for, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them."*²

We are frayed and nibbled survivors in a fallen world. That is true of each and every one of us, including myself. Yet that fact need not fill us with sadness. We've been given a book in which we can see ourselves—imperfect followers of Moses, imperfect disciples of Christ, yet a people ever persevering, turning over rocks, asking questions, praying "How long, O Lord?" as well as "Hosanna in the highest." We are frayed and nibbled survivors who serve a crucified Lord. That's the honest truth. But we are also people of hope because God's grace is made perfect in weakness. And the fraying, nibbling, even painful reality of this life is not the final word.

OK, I will read you something from the letter of Jude—its last two verses. Listen well and take this benediction to heart, all us holy imperfect children of the Lord: *Now to the One who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen and Amen.*

¹ Article in New York Times magazine, November 11, 2018, p. 36.

² Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p. 248 [Ch. 13 "The Horns of the Altar"]