

November 25, 2018 (Journey Worship)

TEXT: Jude 1–4, 17–25

THEME: Wisdom

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today is your lucky day! Today we're going to consider the book of Jude—the next to last book in the entire bible—25 short verses just before you flip the page and leap into the wild visions of the book of Revelation. 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. Yes indeed, today's your lucky day!

There's only one problem—it's not an easy book to understand. We've just heard a few verses from the start of the book and eight verses from the end. It's a short letter written by someone with ties to Jesus' brother James and sent to a small group of churches around 90 CE. The letter is warning the church about false teachers—intruders who have weaseled their way into the congregation and are 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. If you go home and actually read this book for yourself, I recommend that you also read the short book of 2 Peter, which is a few books earlier in the New Testament because 2 Peter quotes several passages from Jude and lays out the same arguments in a much clearer fashion.

Now, that brief summary of Jude doesn't make it sound so bad—so what's the problem with this little letter? Well, I know this will shock you, but some Christians have never read the entire bible. Yes, rumor has it that even some Presbyterians have not read the bible from cover to cover. At best, most churchgoers have only a passing familiarity with the 66 books of the bible. They know that there are creation stories in Genesis in the beginning, the Ten Commandments and Jewish laws in the early books, the history of King David and other kings followed by psalms and lots of prophet books in the Old Testament—while the New Testament has the four gospels about Jesus, the book of Acts, then a bunch of letters by Paul and others, concluding with the end of the world stuff in Revelation. In our bible, there is a 600 year gap between the writing of the book of Malachi (which ends the Old Testament) and the writing of the gospel of Matthew (which starts the New Testament). But truth be told, there were other writings done in that intertestamental period that didn't make it into the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. And the people in the early church—including the author of the book of Jude—knew these stories and legends quite well.

So if I read the entire book of Jude to you, you'll hear references to stories that were well-known back then but won't mean much to you: Stories about fallen angels taking human spouses who now are kept chained in eternal darkness (from the ancient book of Enoch). Stories about the archangel Michael battling with Satan over the body of Moses (from a Jewish text called the Assumption of Moses). References to obscure Old Testament events in the book of Numbers

like when Balaam's donkey argued with him when Balaam took some money and agreed to prophesy against the Israelite people; or when the family of a man named Korah rebelled against Moses, causing him and all his relatives to be swallowed up in a pit and thrown down to the underworld—lighthearted stories like that.

The letter of Jude actually has some great rhetorical moments in it. For example, when describing these false teachers and their unworthy doctrines, the writer describes them as *waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; and wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever*. Those metaphors will definitely get your attention. But to even begin to understand all the references in Jude requires a lot of 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.

So what can we untangle and talk about in our limited time together this morning? Well, there is some real value in looking at the last verses of the letter of Jude. But I want to come at these verses from the broader perspective of the fragile emotional and spiritual health of many people in today's world. I read an article by a professor of psychology named Clay Routledge titled: *Suicides are up. Is This an Existential Crisis?* Deaths by suicide in America have risen by 25% over the past 20 years across almost all ethnic and age groups. Routledge argues that this points to a crisis in American society. Some argue that this is due to people not having access to the mental health resources they need—therapists, antidepressants, affordable treatment centers, etc. And that's true, but it is not the whole truth.

As a behavioral scientist, Routledge argues that the suicide increase is tied to a broader crisis of meaninglessness. In simple terms, human beings—each one of us—carry around the competing stories that life is precious and life is short. We live and work and play, but at some point we all die. No one's really happy about that latter fact, so we either ignore it as best we can or we come to terms with it. The way we come to terms with our mortality is to find ways to make our lives matter. We look for significance in who we are and what we do. When our lives have meaning, we can cope with existential anxiety. When our lives don't have meaning, anxiety takes over and life doesn't seem worth living. Studies bear this out. A lack of meaning in one's life has been linked to alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and suicide. When people experience loss, stress or trauma, it is those who believe that their lives have a purpose whom are best able to cope with these crises.

So how do we find meaning and purpose in our lives? One place is through close relationships with others—family, friends, loved ones. Not just acquaintances or social buddies, but people whom we value and who value us in return. You can be lonely in a big city or on a crowded college campus. To have meaningful

relationships involves connecting with others beyond social niceties—having a trust, a strong sense of being valued by the other people in your life.

One place where this type of deep connection can occur is in a church. We all know that just coming on a Sunday doesn't guarantee one establishes the connections needed to counter life's stress and anxiety. But the potential is there. Even in not-so-great churches, in the less-than-friendly congregations, there is the possibility of healing and spiritual meaning. It is there in the encounters with scripture, in the sacraments of baptism and communion, in times of prayer.

But here's where the long-ago language from Jude is helpful for this conversation. I believe it is impossible to be authentically valued as a person unless you are willing to value and show compassion to others. The narcissist only seeks self-affirmation and so is never at peace because his or her self-worth is always tied to others' praise. The healthy person cares for others and values them, thereby receiving sincere love from others and finding a foundational value in the common life we all live.

By inviting people to church—by connecting with people who find their way to this congregation, to this worship service—we offer a bridge to something that can lead to strength in times of trouble and peace amid a lifetime of anxiety. It comes from an encounter with the fullness of faith—a God who holds us, a Savior who knows us and has forgiven us, a Spirit that is beside us in every breath we take and thought we think. It comes from letting go of our desire to be solely in control and stepping out by faith into a future defined by the Easter promise of hope, healing, and restoration. The secret to success for all this is that we most easily find meaning in our lives when we walk beside someone else and help them find meaning too.

The little church to which Jude wrote expected the end times to come soon, so choosing to do what was right and avoid what was wrong was critical for them. But that motivation was never meant just to be an individual self-help guide; it was meant to motivate them to constantly reach out to others. **(Vs. 20)** *But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.* Great! How do we do that? **(Vs. 22)** *Have mercy on some who are wavering.* Reach out—connect—talk to, pray with, support those beside you. **(Vs. 23)** *Save others by snatching them out of the fire.* Intervene—take a risk—step up or speak out. Ask “Are things alright with you? How can I help?” Follow through because you value them and in that valuing, your life also gains meaning. *Have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.* That sounds a little strange, but what it means is have mercy with humility; reject the things that would destroy others—defiled tunics like physical abuse, racism, irrational hatred, addictions and deep anxieties that stain the image of Christ in those God loves.

For it is in loving them, showing them mercy and grace, that we find meaning in our physical and spiritual lives, and together the entire community of faith is built up to the glory of God.

Today really is your lucky day. The quirky little letter of Jude offers you guidance on finding deep value in your life and a path forward for stronger faith, not only for yourself but for those around you. And as a final blessing, this letter ends with a benediction and a word of hope aimed at each one of us. So hear it and receive it once more today:

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.