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Date: June 24, 2018
Sermon Title: ASP Send-off!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 25:31-40

Matthew 25:31-40

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

There once was a beautiful place; when people first started going there, they thought they had found paradise. It seemed like the "Promised Land," a land "flowing with milk and honey." It was a beautiful land—mountains where you needed mountains, rivers where you needed rivers, valleys where you needed valleys. "God's country," some called it.

One town even named it self "Almost Heaven." There were riches to be mined under the earth; and above the earth, well, breathtaking beauty embracing hard-working people. But over time, problems set in. People turned on one another. Outside forces took control, reshaped the land, inside demons took their toll. Some folks left, some stayed behind, broken, despairing. Places that were once full of life crumbled, fell into disrepair, were even abandoned.

For those of you who know your Bible, you could say I'm talking about ancient Israel around the year 450 B.C., after Israel had been battered and bruised, conquered, laid waste, carried off into bondage, all the promises of the Promised Land laid scattered.

For those of you who know Appalachia, who have been there with Alida once or twice or five or 10 or 20 times, or times even before Alida, any of the 40 years our ASP team has gone to Appalachia, for all of you, or even the newcomers going for the first time . . . Well, Alida has been prepping you all year. You've seen pictures, you've heard stories. All of you together, 312 strong, and everybody in this Church who has kept ASP strong, well, we all know I could be talking about Appalachia.

Old Israel or America's Appalachia, both places of divine promise, both places where poor folks settled to build their paradise on earth. Both places rich with earth's bounty, both places steeped in religious faith. Both places built on hope. And both places, ancient Biblical Israel and 20th- and 21st-century Appalachia, both places torn apart by ancient hatreds, exploitive practices, ravaged by poverty, hopelessness, defeat.

And yet, *and yet*, Israel's misfortune and Appalachia's misery are both lands of extraordinary hope. Here are two books of the Bible you may not know, Ezra and Nehemiah. Those ancient Prophets both tell of the people returning to Israel and refusing to be discouraged. Instead, God puts steel in their spine, sweat on their brow, a shot of spiritual adrenaline, and brick by brick they rebuilt Jerusalem. Mockers and skeptics stood on the sidelines, critics and naysayers laughed, enemies threatened, the apathetic stood by, lazily. But Nehemiah gathered his work crew and declared, "Let us start rebuilding. The God of heaven will give us success." And later he reports, "So we rebuilt the wall, for the people had a mind to work." (Nehemiah 4:6) *The people had a mind to work.*

That's the story of ancient Israel, and that's the story of 40 years of Greenfield Hill in Appalachia—from high school freshman to white-haired, wizened long-ago retirees, 220 teenagers, 90 moms and dads and friends. Some who have never met a hammer, some born with a hammer in their hand. Some go for the food, the snakes, and the heat; some go for the sweat, the blisters, and the homeowners they're about to meet. And whether with mild trepidation, great fear, or sheer joy, they get done what they get done because, simply, "the people have a mind to work." Forty-seven families are about to have a better place to live because of our Appalachia work crews.

Three newspaper articles caught my eye. One was an obituary, another an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* by David Brooks. The last was an eight-page special section in the Sunday *Times* on "Visionaries."

The special section on Visionaries highlighted dozens of people, mostly young people, with the courage to change the world. Medicine, climate, business, the arts, technology. Let me give you two quotes about these visionaries: "All remarkable people have courage." "These people are driven by some cause that compels them to find the courage and take certain risks and work damn hard at it." ("Visionaries With the Courage to Change the World." *The New York Times*. May 24, 2018)

David Brooks's op-ed is titled "What Moral Heroes Are Made Of," and he lists 10 qualities. I will mention just three. Moral heroes "have an insane level of optimism." Moral heroes have a "weird obliviousness to inferior pleasures." And moral heroes have "somebody who planted an ideal in them." (Brooks, David. "What Moral Heroes Are Made Of." *The New York Times*. May 22, 2018. p. A27.)

Wow! An "insane level of optimism," "obliviousness to inferior pleasures," and an "ideal planted in them."

And the obituary: It was for Lerone Bennett, a historian of black America and an editor at *Ebony* magazine. He once said, "Every black person is obligated to try to do what they do as well as any person who ever lived could do it; then, try to save one—just one—person if you can. And then to struggle to destroy a system which is multiplying black victims faster than all the black intellectuals and the black leaders in America can talk about." (Genzlinger, Neil. "Lerone Bennett Jr., Historian of Black America, Dies at 89." *The New York Times*. Feb. 18, 2018. p. A25)

Mr. Bennett was writing as a black person. I'm adapting it as a Christian person. And putting it together with the other two articles.

On this ASP Sunday, we are celebrating a people, 40 years of a people who have "an insane level of optimism," a "weird obliviousness to inferior pleasures," and they have let Alida and God and ASP "plant an ideal in them."

ASP and this Church we count as "visionaries." We are "driven by some cause to find the courage to take the risks and work damn hard at it." And we believe, we *believe*, and we teach and we preach and we show by example that every Christlike person is "obligated to try to do what we do as well as any person who ever lives can do it, and then, save one—just one person—if you can."

You're in Church today on a summer morning. It can mean only one of three things: you're going to ASP, your kid is headed to ASP, or you're part of this humble Church. Whichever you are, you have "an ideal planted in you"; you always "try to do what you do better than anyone," in an effort to save just one; you "have a mind to build," and you "work damn hard at it."

That's what we're about and how we go about what we're about.

Our closing hymn is "Here I am, Lord," No. 452. Let's stand and sing together:

*I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my words to them.
Whom shall I send?*

Here I am, Lord.

*I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will send the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?*

Here I am, Lord.