

To begin this sermon I want to talk about what a sermon is. For most people, the noun "sermon" or the verb "preach" conjure up varied emotions, few of them positive.

I consulted some dictionary definitions of the word "sermon" and this is what I found. "Sermon: An often lengthy and tedious speech of reproof or exhortation." "A speech on conduct or duty." "A moralistic rebuke." "Any serious talk on behavior, responsibility, etc. especially a long and tedious one." And here's my personal favorite - "An annoying harangue." I also discovered that to "preach" is "to give religious advice, esp. in a tiresome manner."

Dictionaries define a word as the culture understands it. "Papa, don't preach". So, it's no wonder that church attendance is in rapid decline. Why in the world would anybody get out of bed on a Sunday morning to go be subjected to a long and tedious rebuke? Wouldn't you rather sleep in, drink your coffee, go for a walk, listen to music, or read the paper? Give me that any day over an annoying harangue.

So it's no wonder that one poll I found said that only 18 % of Americans attend church regularly. In a blog response to this statistic one woman wrote, *"I left the church 35 years ago when I realized it was all a lot of hooey. I realized that indeed I was an atheist and had been since the age of 7. Of course when your father is the local Episcopal priest, it is simple NOT DONE to question it. Imagine my surprise when my own father, about a year before he died, admitted to being an atheist too. It explained a lot."*

Well, at least that explains a lot about the rapid decline in Episcopal Church attendance! C.S. Lewis once said that parishioners used to be embarrassed around their clergy by how little they – the parishioner -believed, now they are embarrassed by how little the clergy believe!

But you certainly don't need an annoying lecture to make you believe. The Bible understands that life itself is difficult enough without compounding the hurt with tedious moralizing and tiresome rebuke from a pulpit. You can get moralizing and rebuke anywhere and everywhere! You usually get it from the people you live with, and I'll bet you get it all the time from yourself.

Last week after his visit Bishop Johnston was effusive about what is going on here at Christ Church. He kindly said that at the end of a Sunday after our 4 services I must feel that I've done more than enough. I told him that usually I go to bed on Sunday nights feeling like I haven't done nearly enough or that I've done the wrong things. I basically deliver myself a "tedious speech of reproof." I sure wish that voice would go away.

I wish it would go away because as I said life is hard enough! I'm reading Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. It's a dark book about the hardness of life, for sure. In one scene, Jude is an 11 year-old orphaned boy from the country hoping to improve his hardscrabble and lonely life by going off to study theology and become a respected academic. He believes he needs to learn Latin on his own if he's ever going to have a chance of entering the hallowed halls of Christminster. Through a tenuous connection with an old schoolmaster he receives a Latin Grammar book in the mail, but he can make neither heads nor tails of it by himself. He collapses in alone in despair, all his dreams demolished.

Hardy writes "*Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked him his trouble, and might have cheered him by saying that his notions were further advanced than those of his grammarian. But nobody did come, because nobody does; and under the crushing recognition of his gigantic error Jude continued to wish himself out of the world.*"

Nobody did come, because nobody does. It's hard to get darker than that, but sometimes it really feels that way, doesn't it? Nobody comes because nobody ever does.

This is where a sermon rightly preached fits in. A sermon rightly preached is a proclamation of news, good news specifically. It is not some vehicle to wheedle you into better behavior. A sermon is the proclamation of an event. In this case, this sermon today is the proclamation that somebody did come along.

That somebody was God himself in Jesus Christ. And in this morning's scripture this is what Jesus had to say. "*I give (my sheep) eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*"

Jesus is having a conversation with scribes and the Pharisees. They want to know if He is the Messiah. I says, "I told you but you do not believe." The Pharisees think Jesus is a whole lot of hooley. This is because they are offended by Jesus' free gift of life to sinners. He eats with sinners. He drinks with sinners. He touches sinners. He loves sinners.

They do not believe because Jesus doesn't preach sermons that are filled with religious moralistic advice about how to be a better person. He preaches God's law for sure, but he doesn't try to be a life coach or a drill sergeant for better behavior. Instead, He forgives people – bad people. He heals people – sick people. He includes people in his circle who normally don't feel comfortable in churches.

Jesus is a whole lot of hooley to the Jews because He doesn't fit into their schema of how a respected religious teacher should talk and act and behave. It's too easy – how can you by-pass the moralizing sermons and go straight to grace and forgiveness? So they do not believe and are not part of His flock. They have heard

the proclamation – The Son of man came not for the righteous, but the unrighteous – and they have responded with a resounding NO!

But there is another group in this passage. It is a group in which you and I would long to be numbered – Jesus' sheep. Jesus says, *"My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand."*

Jesus sheep are like Jude the Obscure, waiting for somebody to come along who cares. His sheep have been harangued for their bad behavior or their inability to do their religious duty. His sheep have failed. His sheep have waited for someone to come along and tell them news that they are loved as they are. His sheep are the one's that have raised the white flag on their own moral effort.

His sheep are the ones hear that "eternal life is given to them" – Given! As in Gift! As in Not dependent on them! – and they leap up and love the shepherd and follow the shepherd. They long to hear his voice – the voice that says over and over again – you are saved by grace through faith. Please tell it to me again and again and again.

I watched a You Tube video about a man who lost 385 pounds through Yoga. More power to him. They interviewed the tattooed, fit, cool looking yoga instructor who delivered a tedious and serious talk on behavior. He said that to lose weight through yoga you've got to accept responsibility for yourself and make right decisions. He said the only power for change is within yourself – there is no one else who will come by to help. It's all on you, he said. Who knew that Yoga instructors are the modern pharisaical sermonizers! Odds are that next year this poor yoga pupil will have put on at least 150 pounds.

Jesus' sheep crumble in a heap when they hear this message. This is a voice they do not wish to hear. Instead, they wish to hear another voice, a beautiful voice, the only voice that says, "I give you eternal life and you will never perish. No one will ever snatch you out of my hand."

Amen.