

Title: Surrendering the Rule

Date: 12/18/2022 (Advent 4, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 7:10-16](#); [Romans 1:1-7](#); [Matthew 1:18-25](#); [Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/PINrzE3O9jw?t=1443>

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Most of the people I'm friends with on Facebook are people I've met through church. So, when there is a popular meme about Jesus or the church, etc., it will pop up on my newsfeed more than once.

Recently, there was one featuring the apostle Paul. It has this image of a man with a long beard in a brown tunic. He is sitting at a desk covered with rolled up scrolls and stacks of paper. As is typical of the way we think of Paul, he is writing a letter.

Next to his head, the text reads: If the apostle Paul were alive today.

Below him is the suggested opening of the letter. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the churches of the United State of America- grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ: I don't even really know where to begin with you guys..."

While it might be tempting to complete this letter, Advent is not so much a season for pointing our fingers at other people as it is an opportunity to prepare ourselves for what is coming. As each day passes, it can feel like the relentless ticking of the clock is pushing us into the coming year. However, the way the church year intersects with the calendar year provides us with this "extra month" to come up with a new year's resolution or, as I've been **very** direct about suggesting, a rule of life.

In the opening of Paul's letter to the Romans, he explains who he is and what he believes because everything he does is driven by his identity and his beliefs. So, as we are developing this rule of life, it is a good time to connect it back to our identity as a follower of Jesus. It is a good time to remind ourselves of what we know and believe about God and God's relationship with us and the world, particularly as we understand it through the good news that is embodied in Jesus the Christ.

This Advent, I've been drawing on the assigned readings to preach a sermon series on having a rule of life. This is what we've got so far:

The first rule of having a rule of life is to talk about having one. Jesus reminded us to keep awake because no one knows when the Son of Man will come.¹ So, with The End (Capital T, Capital E) in mind and in sight, we practice navigating endings and beginnings with intention and awareness.

The second rule is to know the end of life, by which I mean the purpose of our life. John the Baptist warned that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.² If we know the "fruits of repentance" we want to bear, if

we know the things we want to do to show that we have really changed our hearts and lives,³ we will be able to map out a plan.

The third rule is to lay the foundation for what comes after “next,” while keeping in mind the difference between our vision of what is to come as compared to God’s. Even John the Baptist had a different expectation of what the Messiah will say and do as compared to what Jesus did.

Today, the stories of King Ahaz and Joseph point us to a fourth rule.

“[T]he Lord spoke to King Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God... But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.”⁴ On the surface, it sounds like Ahaz is being humble. “God has so much going on. I can’t possibly bother God with this. I’ll just take care of it.” Maybe he was afraid of the answer. Maybe he didn’t want to give up control because he already knew what he was going to do.

Right before the verses we heard today, God told Isaiah to tell Ahaz, “If you do not stand firm in faith, you do not stand at all” (Isa 7:9). Given the response of the king, it sounds like he chose NOT to stand firm in faith. Even with the prophet Isaiah standing in front of him and giving him messages from God, he placed his trust in his own political calculations and strategic alliances. Clearly, being right with God, being aligned with God, wasn’t a priority for him. Instead, he turned away and went his own way.

In the gospel according to Matthew, Joseph makes a different choice.

When he found out that the woman he was engaged to was pregnant, he decided not to make a big deal out of it. He decided he would just dismiss her quietly. They lived in a small town, and news was bound to get around, but *he* wasn’t going to make things even harder for her.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

When Joseph woke up, he didn’t dismiss the dream as, well, a dream. He didn’t question how his subconscious could have possibly come up with this line of reasoning. He didn’t laugh it away. He took Mary as his wife and raised Jesus as his son.

An argument can be made that the stakes are very different. Ahaz is a king, Joseph a carpenter. Ahaz is concerned about a kingdom, Joseph about a young girl and her unborn child.

BUT both are concerned with doing the right thing. Ahaz wants to do right by his people, and Joseph wants to do right by Mary. Ahaz was concerned about his legacy, Joseph about his reputation and Mary’s. Both were making decisions that were going to have lasting repercussions. Ahaz had to live with the consequence of the alliances he made, and Joseph had to look at Mary and Jesus every day.

Ahaz decided he knew best, and Joseph surrendered to God. It is tempting to think of surrender as defeat, as giving up. But is that necessarily the case?

In Brene Brown's interview with Bono about his new book, *Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story*,⁵ Bono said, "[I]t's important to say that surrender does not always have to follow defeat." He goes on to explain that he was born with his fists up, metaphorically and sometimes actually.

So, it's not easy or natural for him to surrender to his maker, his band mates, his wife, his partners. The title of this book doesn't so much reflect what he has done and is more of a prayer for where he needs to be, to put down his fists and stop fighting with his father, with himself, with imaginary foes.

Then Brene Brown asks, "Is surrendering giving up or giving over to?"

Is surrendering giving up or giving over to?

Ahaz saw asking for a sign as giving up. Joseph saw taking Mary as his wife and raising Jesus as his child as giving himself over to God, to God's purpose in this world. Sometimes, it takes more strength to surrender, more courage to admit that we don't always know best, more faith to trust that we are not giving up or giving in, but indeed giving ourselves over to God.

So, the fourth rule of having a rule of life is to remember that God is our reference point.

This helps us tell the difference between whether we are simply giving up or giving ourselves over to God.

This helps us figure out whether we are standing firm in our faith or choosing to go our own way.

At the end of the year, we ask:

Where have we been, as it relates to Christ?

Where are we right now, as it relates to where God has called us to be?

Where are we going, as it relates to where the Holy Spirit is nudging us?

You can mix and match these three questions between the three persons of the Trinity, or just pick one. The important thing is that we are NOT measuring ourselves against other people. This is not about productivity, perfection, or success as we've defined it for ourselves. We are taking a good look at where we are **in relation to God**.

This is an important piece to keep in mind. Practices rooted in religion can be separated from their grounding. They can be repackaged and sold as something we should do because it's good for us. Gratitude journals are good for our mental health. Yoga is good for our breath and posture. Even the Rule of St. Benedict has been promoted as good management practice.

A good life planner or a good bullet journal will help you map out your goals for the various aspects of your life. Those resources can suggest strategies for moving forward and tracking your progress on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

You can engage in any of these practices without belonging to any church or religion, without even coming close to the word “spirituality.”

But then these practices are just about you, or the one team or company you’re managing. These practices can become an end unto themselves; they can keep us from looking beyond them to connect with something bigger, greater, deeper.

As followers of Jesus, the end of our practices, as in both the purpose AND the goal of our practices, is about more than just ourselves.

Sabbath wasn’t only about self-care, it was also about **community care**.

We take Sabbath so other members of our family, other workers, and even animals and the earth itself can also take Sabbath. If we are not careful, we forget that practices like the Sabbath and the rule of life are made for us, we are not made for these practices.

So, following the words of Psalm 80, we pray,
Restore us, O God of hosts; show us the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

May we never turn away from you.

Whether we come up with a resolution, a set of priorities, or a rule of life,
may it give us life, may it remind us to call upon your name and stand firm in faith.

Amen.

¹ Mt 24:36-44

² Mt 3:1-12

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Matthew%203:8>

⁴ Isa 7:10-16

⁵ <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/songs-of-surrender-and-carrying-the-weight-of-our-contradictions-part-2-of-2/>