

Title: With What Shall We Come Before the Lord?
Date: 1/29/2023 (Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Micah 6:1-8](#); [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#); [Matthew 5:1-12](#); [Psalm 15](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/oLuobIhBosA?t=1266>

O God, you have set us free so that we might do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you, our Lord. Help us recognize *your* grace and wisdom in what the world calls foolishness. Grant that we may see the world through your eyes so that we will live as if the kingdom of heaven is not just near, but already here.
Amen.

Today, we will hold our annual meeting right after this service. Last year, we had it on Zoom. That gave me the chance to join you from Chicago to say hi and answer a few questions. In case you're wondering, I'm still willing to stand in line with you for barbeque, just tell me where and when. I'm still happy to sit or stand by you to cheer on your favorite sports teams, as long as there are snacks.

In the day-to-day life of a church, oftentimes a person will focus on a specific ministry, or two. Each of us is called by God to identify and exercise our spiritual gifts. Coming together at the Annual Meeting reminds us that we are part of a larger family. Our spiritual gifts aren't granted to us just for our own benefit; they are gifts for the good of the whole.

Together, we make up the body of Christ. When we talk about being a member of a church, it isn't just like being part of a club, or the cast & crew of a show, or any kind of team.

We are also talking about members of the body as in the parts of a body: hands and feet, eyes and ears, thumb and pinky, prostate and vertebrae. You get the point. Together, we can live out a greater purpose and mission than it is possible on our own.

Think Voltron, or the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, or Captain Planet and the Planetegers. When they are missing a robot lion, or a power ranger, or a planeteer, they can't fully become who they are called to be as a team. Likewise, if any of us is missing, that doesn't just affect how much we can do; it changes who we are, what we can become.

That begs the question: Who are we, and what is our mission? We track our attendance from week to week, we examine our finances from month to month. At least once a year, it is good to take a big step back and ask big picture questions like: What is our charism, what is the extraordinary gift given to St. Alban's by the Holy Spirit for the good of the church,¹ for the good of South Austin and Buda and Kyle, for the folks moving in all around us?

In the words of the prophet Micah, this is like asking ourselves, "With what shall we come before the Lord, and bow ourselves before God on high?" (Mic 6:6).

In one sense, the answer is right there in the verses that follow. We must be a community that is willing to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. We must be a community that looks at that verse and treat it as **one** command and not three. They are intertwined; they have to be.

In the span of this week, my heart has been broken by eleven people murdered at a ballroom dance studio in Monterey Park² on the eve of Lunar New Year and the seven people murdered at two mushroom farms in Half Moon Bay a few days after that.³ I couldn't watch the videos, but I read a detailed account of how five policemen beat Tyre Nichols so badly he died three days later.⁴

The motive of the Monterey Park shooter is still unknown, but he had been a part of that dance studio years ago. He even met his ex-wife there. The shooter in Half Moon Bay felt wronged by a supervisor and took justice into his own hands. Policemen are supposed to be part of the justice system, and yet...

Murders like these happen when justice is enacted separately from kindness, without considering the humanity of the persons at the end of the gun, or the baton, or the tasers. This is what happens when justice is enacted without humility before God; when people take on more authority than any person can rightfully claim.

Murders like these will happen as long as doing justice is viewed as separate from loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. That kind of justice breeds vengeance and anger; it is not aimed at bringing healing to the victims or the perpetrators or the communities. That kind of justice is more about punishment than restoration or proactive prevention.

In the same way that we might want to reframe self-care as us-care or community-care, justice is about more than the perpetrator, or perpetrators, in any given case and their victims. Nothing we do can bring the victims back to life or erase the trauma experienced by those who have been affected by all this violence and loss. Justice has to be about transforming this world we live in so that there aren't any more perpetrators, so that there aren't any more victims.

That might sound like foolishness; it might be foolish to believe that this is possible. Likewise, some considered the death of Jesus on the cross to be foolishness and scandal. But viewed through the resurrection, foolishness and scandal have become wisdom and salvation.

The prophets and the psalmists point us toward God; they showed us what to strive for. Look at this partial list from Psalm 15. To abide with God on God's holy hill, we have to:

- lead a completely blameless life and do what is right,
- always speak the truth from our hearts, in our workplaces and at Thanksgiving tables,
- be free of guile, do no evil, and show no contempt (and yes, rolling your eyes count).

We may not be able to do all these things all the time. But if not one of us takes even a single step toward God, we will never get any closer to the Kingdom of Heaven as a people. And when we do some of these things, some of the time, we get a glimpse, a taste, of what it's like to be in the presence of God, to be in right relationship with God and our neighbors. This feeling doesn't come from looking down at others from a place of moral superiority; it comes from knowing that we are striving to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, no matter how hard it is, no matter how long it will take.

When we ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord, and bow ourselves before God on high?" (Mic 6:6), we might feel like we need to earn the right to stand in the presence of God.

However, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:27-28).

To be clear, God is not telling us to become foolish. God is not telling us to become weak. God is not telling us to become low and despised.

Rather, God is telling us that when we feel foolish, or weak, or low and despised, God isn't going to avoid us; God will still choose us. God sees something happening in us that we can't see yet. So, we can let go of the negative emotions, like shame or guilt or frustration, that come from seeing ourselves through the eyes of the world rather than the eyes of God.

At the same time, God is telling us that when we see someone else as foolish, or weak, or low and despised, that does not mean God is not with them, that God did not choose them, that God is punishing them. They too have a share in the grace and wisdom of God.

Likewise, when Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, he is telling us that what the world may see as curse, what we may see as a curse, is a blessing. In other translations of the Beatitudes, sometimes "Blessed are" is translated as "Happy are" or "Great blessings belong to"⁵ or even "Congratulations!"⁶

There are moments in life when it feels like we are cursed, like we will never stop mourning, that we will always be poor in spirit, that we will always be meek. There are moments when it feels like hungering and thirsting for righteousness is useless, because things will never change. There are moments when being merciful and pure in heart or striving for peace seem naïve, because people might take advantage of our good nature. To be clear, God is NOT trying to gaslight us. God is not asking us to be something we're not, nor is God asking us to deny our feelings. God simply sees more than we do. God sees through the present moment into the promise of the future, and God will walk by our side until we get there.

Jesus tells us that we are not cursed, that we have not been abandoned by God. God did not cause the bad things to happen; we did not cause the bad things to happen. So, even when we think we are falling short, even when we think we are broken, we are still the children of God, and the Kingdom of heaven is still ours.

So...

Blessed are those whose water pipes burst.

Blessed are those who have not yet found a way to meet their neighbors.

Blessed are those dealing with shortfalls in their budget.

Blessed are parishes trying to figure out who they are and the spiritual gifts they have to offer.

Let us proclaim the foolishness of the cross to the world. Let us show with our words and deeds that death is not the end of life. After death comes more life, new life, if we have the eyes to see it, the mind to make sense of it and the heart to embrace it.

In moments when it feels like there is too much to bear, when we feel more cursed than blessed, when the road ahead isn't as clearly mapped out as we'd like let us remember that this is the day the Lord has made; this is the body of Christ that has gathered around the Holy table. We have been chosen, and we have been blessed.

So, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charism>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/24/us/monterey-park-california-mass-shooting-tuesday/index.html>

³ <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/investigations/half-moon-bay-shooting-investigation/3140917/>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/27/us/tyre-nichols-memphis-friday/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Matthew%205:3>

⁶ <https://lovinggodwithallyourmind.com/2011/08/the-sermon-on-the-mount-2-congratulations/>