

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 2023
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[Proper 27A, track 1: Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13]

Have you heard of Omar ibn Said? Born in what is now Senegal, in West Africa, around 1770, to a wealthy Muslim family, he spent 25 years studying with prominent Islamic scholars: mathematics, astronomy, and theology, including close study of the Quran and its interpretation. In 1807, in his mid-to-late 30s, he was abducted, and sold, shipped as cargo across the sea to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was sold to a cruel master.

Omar escaped and made his way to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he was captured, and purchased again, this time by a more humane local master who was impressed with his literacy and learning. Omar wrote an autobiography, in Arabic, now available in English translation, which I hope to read soon. He died, still enslaved, in 1864.

If you *have* heard of Omar ibn Said, it's likely for the same reason I have: a Pulitzer Prize winning new opera, *Omar*, by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, currently playing at the San Francisco Opera. I went this past Tuesday night. It's wonderful, powerful, and I recommend seeing it if you can. In one scene that really stayed with me, the new master is speaking to Omar, and expresses a measure of respect for Omar's learning and piety, though of course, he adds, "you serve a false God."

I felt, in that moment, a lot more admiration for, and attraction to, the rich faith that was sustaining the humanity of this enslaved Muslim scholar, than that of his Christian master. Whose God would I choose?

In today's first reading, Joshua challenges the Israelites:

"Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in

Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Now, I was almost going to say that the gods and goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt aren't really live options for us today, but of course there is a temple of Isis in Geyserville. Still, on the whole, it's perhaps more the many deities of popular consumer and celebrity culture that people today are tempted to serve with their time, talent, treasure, and devotion. But, after *Omar*, I find myself thinking instead about the various "Gods" that Abrahamic monotheists have worshipped and served down the ages, Christians in particular.

Who *is* this God, the LORD? *That*, in a way, has been the question down the ages, from Moses and Joshua, to Jesus, to today. We confess that we believe in one God, one Lord, as do all our Christian siblings through history and today. We have all claimed to worship the one God. But if you look into the words and actions of these Christians and attempt to picture the *character* of the God they proclaim and worship, the picture isn't always the same. What is God actually *like*? *Who* is God? Where and how does this God show up? What are the pictures of God that have taken up residence in our souls? In your soul?

As Christians, our core conviction, I hope it's fair to say, is that Jesus, son of Mary, is the one who reveals to us who God is and what God is like. Jesus; Emanuel; God with us; that God's absolute truth is revealed in infinite, self-giving love, boundless compassion, unending mercy. And a God with particular concern for the oppressed, the abused, the enslaved. I would say that Jesus depicts

for us a God in whom violence and vengeance and coercion are utterly absent.

Our sins bring about pain and suffering (for ourselves and for others), and there is pain and suffering for us in realizing our faults, recognizing our wrongs and wrongheadedness, and finding our way into that infinite stream of mercy. All of that can hurt, but it's not God willfully inflicting suffering on us. We have stories from our ancestors that say so, but in the light of Jesus we must re-interpret those stories in the light of love.

For example, maybe your ears pricked up a bit at this:

Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good."

Hmm. Right? What do we do with this? I would say we need some interpretation, some reframing here. When you or I turn away from what we know to be true, no good will come of it. We are setting ourselves—and mostly likely others, too—up for suffering. If we turn aside from the way of love, hurt will follow.

Love allows us the freedom to choose, and love allows us to experience the consequences of our choices, but God never turns mean on us. In Jesus, we find that God is right there with us all along, suffering with us the consequences of our choices; not the inflictor of punishment but the co-sufferer. God with us. Always.

It goes without saying that not all passages of Scripture make this crystal clear.

The many stories of the Bible give us opportunity to remember our ancestors, to wonder at and honor their struggles to know God, *and* to reflect on the stories they have given us in the light of the gospel of Jesus. The stories are ancient and powerful, *and* the picture of God in the ancient stories often needs to be critiqued in the light of the Gospel, in the light

of Jesus; and the Holy Spirit gives us the freedom and the responsibility to do exactly that.

The same goes for the stories of God, explicit and implicit, that we carry in our psyches today. I would say that Jesus presents us with an image of an absolutely non-violent, non-coercive image of God, but the old wrathful deity dies hard, and is not entirely absent even from the pages of the New Testament, nor from our souls. Does that ring true for you?

Seventeen centuries years ago, without I think quite knowing what was happening, the church found itself in bed with the Empire that up till then had sporadically persecuted it. In more or less a single generation, Christians went from being outsiders, identified with the poor and enslaved, to imperially protected insiders associating with the rich and powerful. It's hard to imagine what a head-spinning, disorienting, exciting, confusing, dangerous time it was.

This marriage of church and empire: was it the Triumph of Christianity (as it came to be called), or a suicide pact, or somehow both at once? Can the gospel of Jesus really be married to the coercive power of the state, to top-down, coercive imperial power? And when that marriage is attempted, what happens to the image of God?

On one hand the story and the values of the gospel are more widely heard, begin to soak more and more into the culture; on the other hand, the image of God becomes more and more allied with this-worldly power, an upholder of the status quo, including state violence and coercion. This mixture somehow carries on for centuries, but is contradictory and unsustainable to the core, perverting the Gospel even as it promotes it. That's our history.

This marriage of church and empire has been unravelling for 500 years, as was always inevitable. It was never going to last. But the psychological, emotional attachment to a God of coercive and punitive power persists in almost all of us, to some more or less conscious extent. Those who reject Christianity because of this image of God are not wrong.

In a world in which so many people reject Christianity for good reasons and so many embrace it for bad reasons, what are we to do?

What do you think?

Jesus says: keep awake. We need to keep our lamps burning. In today's parable of the bridesmaids, I'm particularly haunted by the end, the words of the bridegroom to the foolish bridesmaids who, after resupplying their oil, arrive late to the feast, after the door is shut: "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

This makes me wonder if the lamps and the oil that feeds them are somehow about the knowledge of God, and by that I mean simultaneously, God's knowledge of us, and our knowledge of God. Yes, we can learn *about* God by study (perhaps even by listening to sermons), but the knowledge *of* God that Jesus offers us is the knowledge of intimate personal relationship.

We've all heard Paul speak of this relationship of mutual knowledge and love, and how in this life it is always partial on our side and perfect on God's side: "For as yet we see by way of a mirror, in an enigma, but then face to face; as yet I know partially, but then I shall know fully, just as I am fully known."¹

You and I *are* fully known, in depths of ourselves that are beyond our fathoming, by the infinite love, grace, mercy of God. Our knowing of God comes through experiencing God's knowing of us in Christ. This means working through the images of God that we carry in our psyches, images formed in our families of origin, in our life experiences, in the messages we have internalized from the culture surrounding us, and from that complicated Christian history.

Christ invites us into an infinite light that already shines deep within us, a light to decontaminate, a fire to burn away all false images of a punitive and vindictive God.

The oil for the lamps? Perhaps the oil is you and me, our whole, imperfect selves, that we are invited to surrender to the flame. We are invited to shine with God's light as our false images of God are burned away by the love of Christ, as our true selves are more and more revealed, burning but not consumed. This is hard, challenging work, feeding our whole selves into the fire.

We can help and support one another in this, but no one else can do it for you, or for me. It's the work of living out our baptism, our spiritual practice, dying and rising in Christ, the costly work of surrendering ourselves to the flame, allowing all that is false in us to be burned away, that we might shine with the gracious light of Christ's presence, that God may be seen, and known, and adored. As for us, even so may we serve the Lord, and "be with the Lord forever."²

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

² 1 Thessalonians 4:17

