

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Carole Johannsen
Christ Episcopal Church – Tarrytown, New York
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14A RCL) – August 10, 2014

When I was completing my undergraduate college work, way back in the 80s, I took a course in computer science when computer science was so new that only one professor was teaching it and our textbook was his typed notes.

We used the computer language called "Basic" to study programming, and its principle was simple: using "**if—then**" statements, we created logical paths for the program to follow. You told the computer that **if** such-and-such happened, **then** such-and-such should follow. Every turn in your computer program was signaled by an **if—then** statement and the program made its choices accordingly. For instance, "**If**" you sold six boxes of Girl Scout cookies at \$2 per box, **then** you earned \$12. **If** no boxes were sold, **then** the program would move on to the next set of choices.

Basic computer language only imitated the way people usually reasoned and had for most of human history. Some of the earliest stories in the Hebrew Bible use those very words to describe human choices. We read in Deuteronomy, chapter 30: **If** you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, **then** you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess." (30:16)

A bit later in Israel's history, when King Solomon prayed at the dedication of the great Temple he had built for the Lord, he prayed to God: **If** your people sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them, yet if they come to their senses and repent, and repent with all their heart and soul, **then** hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and forgive your people who have sinned against you. (I Kings 8)

If—then is simply a basic way to order the world.

As children, every one of us believed that the world operated on an **if—then** principle. **If** we misbehaved, **then** we'd be punished. **If** we ate all our dinner, **then we deserved dessert**. And the part of each one of us, deep inside, that is still a child, still wants the world to be that just and predictable. **If** I live a decent and godly life, **then** I should not have to worry about cancer, accidents, heart attacks. **If** I work hard and invest wisely, **then** my old age will be secure. It's a comforting way of thinking, and it's hard to shake it off.

But that little word "if" is tricky when it involves faith. Consider Peter in today's gospel: "Lord, **if** it is you, (**then**) command me to come to you on the water. But **if/then** statements are conditional, and what Jesus demanded of Peter was unconditional faith. And Peter, being as human as the rest of us, couldn't quite make that leap. He lost sight of Jesus and focused instead on the strong wind. And he sank.

Now, it's easy for me to stand here and preach to you that you should keep your eyes on Christ at all times, but I also know from my own experience that it's no easy thing to keep one's eyes on Jesus when there is so much going on around us.

I spend a good part of my workdays in the hospital praying with people, and my goal is always to help them find the Holy in their own lives, however they understand holiness. Some people posit great power in the clergy, assuming that by virtue of ordination, I have more of God's attention than they do—which of course, is not at all the case. So I have to be really careful when I pray with them because if **I** pray for cure and it doesn't come, faith can be seriously damaged. Instead I begin all prayers are we do in our worship, by praising God and thanking God for being present with the patient or the loved one for whom I'm praying. Then I repeat their story, as they've just told it to me, including their needs, which helps people to know they've been heard. I close by praying that they may be able to stay focused on God and depend on God's love and presence with them. The important thing about the prayer is that they know God is with them in whatever it is they must endure, be it strong winds or ill health, and that keeping their eyes on God, or Christ, will sustain their endurance. That is the best hope I can offer them.

C.S. Lewis, that most articulate Christian evangelist, once wrote these lines in his basic treatise on our faith, *Mere Christianity*:

Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither. It seems a strange rule, but something like it can be seen at work in other matters. Health is a great blessing, but the moment you make health one of your main, direct objects you start becoming a crank and imagining there is something wrong with you. You are only likely to get health provided you want other things more – food, games, work, fun, open air. In the same way, we shall never save civilisation as long as civilisation is our main object. We must learn to want something else even more.

And God knows, the today's world demonstrates the truth of Lewis's words!

To paraphrase Lewis (which in itself seems like a sacrilege): it is only when we focus on God and not on worldly details, that the worldly details become more manageable. We do not abdicate from taking care of business, but we do align ourselves with God as co-creators to engage in the work of living. My training as a professional healthcare chaplain has informed me about the psychological benefits of prayer when prayer is well prayed. But my prayers with patients and loved ones has informed my own spiritual life as well. I know that when I focus on God, whatever words I mumble are less important than my confidence that God is hearing the prayers of my heart and is paying attention. My role is to pay attention as well.

Imagine Peter saying, not “Lord, IF it is you, command me...” but rather, “Lord, it is YOU!” Period. Perhaps we'd not have a story worth writing into the gospel, because perhaps Peter would not have sunk.

When Christ bids us to “Come,” as he bid Peter, we're foolish if we say “If”: IF it will be easy, Lord. IF I have time, Lord. IF this or that condition is met, Lord. IF, *if* I know it is really you, Lord— THEN I will come. Conditional faith doesn't cheat God; it cheats us. Christ simply said, “Come.” There are no conditions set on his love, only an invitation. *Amen.*

Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33