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Christ Episcopal Church  
Valdosta, Georgia  
November 14, 2021

## **Inwardly Digesting**

*Mark 13*

The sound of a fire alarm ringing out during nap time at the preschool changed everything in seconds. Before the alarm, I was in the preschool room with the oldest students at the preschool, the four-year olds. The preschool director and I were talking quietly about the school board meeting that week. Well into an after-lunch rest, 65 students in our four classrooms were quietly resting with most actually napping when the alarm blared.

As the pastor of a church that founded a preschool, I had taken part in monthly fire drills. This was not a drill. More quickly and orderly than seemed possible, every child in the building was up from their mat, out the door, standing at the designated area for their classroom, teachers had accounted for all on their attendance list and out Director was checking the building as the siren of the fire engines grew louder. A combination of training, practicing, drilling each month and shot of adrenaline from the fear of fire in our building had worked. Only when all were accounted for did we learn that the church secretary had badly burned her popcorn. The smoke from the microwave wafting to the fire alarm in the kitchen setting the emergency evacuation in motion.

She was embarrassed. I was amazed. Later the director and I would review the video cameras from every area and find that not a single step had been missed. Every teacher and aid had focused on the children, getting them out and accounted for more quickly than in our monthly fire drills.

That prompt evacuation of the preschool came to back me in a very different context as I was praying through this sermon.

I had been pondering the collect for this morning. It's one of a half dozen solid my favorite prayers of mine in the Book of Common Prayer.

A collect (pronounced Kah-Lekt) is a prayer which collects the themes of the readings into a particular form which begins with an invocation based on something we know of God from scripture and then makes an appeal to God based on that knowledge of God and ends by ascribing glory to God. Those three parts are all in this morning's collect which said,

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

So to break this collect apart, we see the invocation tells us that we know from Scripture that God caused Scripture to be written for our learning. Then based on that we ask God to help us as we not only read, but ingest the Word of God for the purpose of helping us hold fast to the blessed hope of everlasting life God gave us in His Son Jesus. What we are to do with Scriptures is "to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." This is a very serious understanding of the Bible. This is no passing interest of the Bible alongside other books, but a real, intentional plan for marinating yourself in God's Word.

The pattern is all too familiar. Tragedy strikes and the question rings out, "Where was God when this happened?" How can we account for all the chances and changes of this life from child abuse to wild fires? Scripture does speak to those concerns, but one can have trouble hearing the voice of God in scripture as the context for hearing the answer is wrong. Tragedy strikes; then we run to the Bible for answers. The text wasn't designed to work that way. The Bible is not a troubleshooting guide for life. The Bible is God's living Word created to speak to your heart each day.

This has long been The Episcopal Church's normative way to encounter scripture—as part of a pattern of daily reading. The daily offices of the Book of Common Prayer were designed centuries ago with daily reading of scripture in the context of worship in mind for all the church. *Forward Day by Day* was created to encourage that daily reading of scripture. Both Morning and Evening Prayer and *Forward Day by Day* use the same lectionary. Either pattern will take less than half an hour a day.

With this brief commitment of time added to your morning routine or your commute time, you marinate your life in God's Word. What this will do for your outlook over time is revolutionary. Rather than encountering issues in life and running to the Bible for answers, you will immerse yourself in the Bible daily and live into the answers from that new outlook.

Besides, if you didn't take this approach, you would probably never find an occasion to read the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, from which this morning's Gospel reading is taken. Jesus says those not too comforting words as Jesus tells of the end of the age saying,

Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.

Youch! That's not going to help when you get laid off from your job, or your child starts using drugs, or your lab results come back positive for cancer. Better keep reading. Then Jesus says,

And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

No help there either for my troubles. Then finally Jesus says, “But be alert; I have already told you everything.” I have already told you everything he says. This is when it should dawn on us to read it all. It’s all in here. Not everything Jesus said and did, that would be too big a book. But all things necessary for salvation, that’s what’s in scripture.

Because Jesus’ dire words in the little apocalypse that is Mark 13 really only amount to a warning from our Lord that the End of Time will come without warning. There won’t be time for a crash course. And of course, the end of time comes for some people every day. So without even getting to The Last Days, thousands, millions of people reach their last day every day. And the point of the apocalyptic reading for this morning is to be ready, to be alert, knowing that Jesus has already told you everything you need to know.

That’s why this collect fits with this reading. When it comes to the Last Days, it’s no time to blow the dust off the gold foil on your Bible. When bad times come in your life you’ll want to have already heard the scripture, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digest the scripture. And this is true whether you are facing the end of your life or a trying time at school or work or home.

And now we circle around to the start of this sermon. When smoke billowed up to set the alarm off in the preschool was not the time to prepare for what would happen next.

It is the same with your spiritual life. Do not wait until your spiritual heart rate and breathing flat line to pick up the instruction manual. Instead, pick it up now. Don’t get overly ambitious. Start slow, follow a pattern that you can keep up. Don’t worry about whether or not you are “getting it” or whether or not “it’s working.” Just trust the process. Billions of Christians have been marinated over time in this same sauce and they came out quite tasty. So just trust that over time God will be revealed to you in ever new and every amazing ways.

That will only come if you stick with reading even when it makes no sense or seems to be pointless. But the discipline matters. For you don't want just a passing glance at the cover of a Bible. That won't help when you need the wisdom from Scripture. Instead try a more serious and sustained encounter with God's Word and you will find it little by little transforming your life for the better.

Let us pray,

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*