

**O Happy Torah; O Happy God**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Psalm 119:1-8**  
**February 12, 2017**

I want to use this morning's homily to dismiss two common falsehoods.

Falsehood Number One: The way of Torah is impossible. It's treacherous, dangerous even.

And Falsehood Number Two: The Apocalypse is upon us. Like now. Right now!

Let's start with Torah. Too often, we picture following Torah – that is, walking a path that honors our covenant with God – as something that is unobtainable. Something that is perilous. Something that can only end in disaster, because our imperfections will eventually lead to our inability to live up to God's calling. At some point, we're bound to fail – we'll lie, or cheat, or steal, or kill, or lust after false idols, or wear white after Labor Day, or even allow ourselves to cheer for New England in the Super Bowl. And when we do slip up, God will be waiting. Vengeance. Fire or flames or shackles. Something permanent and uncomfortable. We know this. And so we're always on guard.

We're like Indiana Jones in *The Last Crusade*. We're walking this tightrope. Stay on the narrow path and God's glory awaits, a grail even! But one false move, one sudden step, one wrong inkling, and booby traps abound. Harrison Ford had a cool hat and a whip, and his dad was Sean Connery, and he still misspelled Jehovah's name (That I sure is tricky!), and barely stayed on the right path. And even then, he left that old temple in ruins! But what about us? Some of us will never be as good lookin' as Hank and Sean, and some of us don't own a whip or a cool hat, and as far as I know, none of us in this room have an advanced degree in archeology. We're doomed, like Temple of Doomed!!!

Lucky for us, today's lection, Psalm 119 is a myth-buster!

The text doesn't tell us that those who walk in the way of the Lord are anxious. Or fearful. Or regretful. Or angry. Or hate-filled. Or Guilty. Or imperfect. Or temporary.

Happy. The text says happy. Happy.

Happy!!! Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.

Happy!!! Happy are those who seek God with their whole heart.

So am I missing something? How does something so happy get turned into something so fearful?

The remaining six verses of our text are a plea to God. "Look, God," the author says, "I want to follow you, I want to live up to your high standards, I want to realize my calling – that means my eyes, my heart, my hands, my feet, my whole being, they are all fixed on you! And I'm counting on you not to forsake me in such an endeavor."

That brings us to our second falsehood, this impending Apocalypse. Apocalyptic language that tells us God's coming, y'all, and not in a pleasant way. He's coming to set us sinners right, to lay waste to the world we know now, and make way for something different. Something fiery and hot and justice-y.

And so we look for signs that it's all going wrong.

This year there are new names and phrases: American Carnage; The Fourth Turning; Radical Islamic Terror Unleashed; *The Fast and the Furious 8* (yeah, that's really a thing!) – all signs that God is disappearing.

But that's all they are: new names for the same misguided fears. Signs that God has finally had it, and doubts that the world can continue to exist. Maybe we didn't call it Apocalypse back then, but the idea was still there: The primordial flood; slavery in Egypt; exile in Assyria and Babylonia; a temple in ruins, not once but twice, and a cross, a bloodied cross on a dark, dark Friday. God's done with this place. God's moving on to better things, but not before we all get wiped out in spectacular fashion.

The darker parts of our human history have portrayed the narrative that God has created a world and a standard we cannot live into.

This is this sort of falsehood, and the sort of toxic theology that reduces God to a cosmic whack-a-mole. God sits around waiting for our futility to become apparent so that one-by-one we can be plucked from the path of happiness and discarded into the pit of despair.

It's this kind of false theology that makes us apprehensive at best, and just-plain-malicious at our worst, when faced with the challenge of keeping God's covenant. Happy are those who seek to walk in the law of the Lord, and happy are those who seek God with their whole heart? How can that be?

Myth-buster number two, with an assist from a friend. This past week, Jacqueline and I lost a dear friend, Claude. In his 98 years on earth, he left us lots of wisdom. He was a devoted member of a Bible Study class I used to teach. And nearly every week, regardless of the text we would study, he would drive us back to a singular thought. I'm paraphrasing:

People throughout history have struggled to make sense of just who God is. What is God's nature and character? And up to this point, the story of Jesus provides us with our best understanding of the divine. It's three simple words: God is love.

I believe that Claude is right. And because he's right, that means that living in covenant with God is not something to be feared. It is something to be embraced. It is something that leads to a happy, fulfilling life. And if God is love, that means that God does not seek to knock us off a path bent on righteousness, nor does God wait for us to fall into some forsaken space.

I believe that God waits beneath us with mother eagle's wings; God guards us like a mama bear; God seeks us like an old woman collecting coins – God is always there, nudging us, assisting us, guiding us on the path that Torah forges. God is love!

And such a path does not lead to a spectacular end, but rather, a spectacular new beginning.

Tillie and Jonathan told us as much the last two weeks when they read from the Sermon on the Mount. The world is not ending. Instead, God's presence is breaking into this world. And the happy ones who cling to Sinai's covenant will find a new reality. There may still be devastation; there may still be sorrow; there may still be evil; there may still be the same old powers and principalities.

But blessed be the poor in spirit, and those who mourn, and those who are meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who are merciful, and pure at heart, and who seek peace, and who are persecuted, and even those who are reviled. Because they will find God here. And now. And in this happy, living Torah, in the presence of a happy God, their hearts will always be full.

Sardis Baptist Church, we have a path to forge, and a covenant to keep, and a God to honor, and neighbors to love, and justice to pursue, and a kingdom to help bring about. But this task is not daunting. IT IS DOABLE!!! REALLY DOABLE!!! And the God we seek to do it for offers us all the support we need.

Friends, there is a sanctuary that lives and dwells inside the pages of this good book. And there is a loving God revealed. And there is a joy to be found in a community that shares this good book and shares this good God.

O Happy Torah! O Happy God! O Happy Sardis!

May it always be so!