

I am going to begin by quoting someone I've never before quoted in a sermon, I may well never quote again, Megan Rapinoe, the purple-headed soccer player who's been in the news this week. You may have heard that she played her final ever game at the end of her glittering career here in San Diego at the Snapdragon Stadium, but it didn't go as she planned. It was a final. She was hoping to go out in style, but three minutes into the game, she snapped her Achilles tendon. Her game was over, her career was over. After the game she was quoted as saying, "I'm not a religious person, but if there was a God, this is proof that there isn't."

I won't get into either the grammar or the theology of that statement. What I do want to say, and this is why I quoted her, is because what's, well, one of the things that's wrong with that statement is the assumption that Megan Rapinoe makes about God. She makes a false assumption. She's assuming the word God is used for some sort of fairy godmother-like figure who exists to protect us from any kind of bad thing ever happening to us. But that is not God as we or the Christian tradition has ever understood God. Meghan's made a false assumption, like we all do. We all bring our assumptions, some better than others, some plainly false into our understanding of God and life.

Advent, which is the season rapidly approaching, is a time to question our assumptions, to put things to one side and think, is that really how it is or is that just how I've always thought it was or how I've been taught? Advent's a time to think seriously about our assumptions and our thinking. Advent has started early for us this year. The readings we had both last week and this week have a very, very strong Advent theme. I'm going to go with that and talk about the element of surprise. That's a strong theme in Advent. We heard it with reference to the thief coming in the night and lots of references to the day of the Lord that we heard in all of our readings coming at a time when we'd least expect it.

Bear with me, prepare to be surprised and challenged as I turn to the parable set for today. I don't think this parable is deliberately placed in the midst of what many parishes have as their stewardship season, but it certainly does encourage a certain way of reading the text. It's a familiar story. A wealthy man goes on a

trip, and he entrusts three slaves with his talents. Then he goes away for a long time. While he is gone, two of his servants invest the money they'd be given and make huge profits for their master. The third slave meanwhile digs a hole in the ground and buries the talent that was given to him.

When the master returns, the slaves who've turned a profit are commended, gifted with more wealth, and invited to enter into the joy of their master. But the third slave is called wicked, lazy, and worthless and cast into the outer darkness. This is a story that we often associate with stewardship. As in our master, God, has entrusted each of us with talents, which we understand skills, ability, resources, and God expects us to invest those talents creatively for the good of the kingdom. If we do so, God will praise us and reward us accordingly. But if we bury our talents, refusing to invest them as God desires, God will consider us worthless stewards and will suffer the rather unpleasant consequences of our master's displeasure.

There's an assumption behind this reading of the text, which I'm just not comfortable with. The assumption is that the master in this story represents God or Jesus. But does that fit with the rest of scripture, which is a question we must always ask when interpreting a passage from the Bible. Does the rest of the Bible depict God as a harsh man reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter? I'm not sure.

It's not like the God who tells the harvesters in the Old Testament to harvest badly, leaving the edge of the field to be gleaned by those who don't have much. What about the fact that the landowner is absent in this story? Matthew, who's telling the story, writes just a couple of chapters later that Jesus' final words to his disciples were that "I will be with you always."

The moral of the story is problematic too. To all who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. This moral directly contradicts the teaching, say, of Amos who warned against those who add field to field and leave behind the edges and forget the landless. It's contrary to the warnings Jesus issued against greed and his

good news for the poor. It doesn't jive with the witness of the early church who pooled their resources so that everyone would have enough.

The assumption that in God's economy the rich get richer, and the poor simply get poorer, doesn't fit with the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It may well be the way of the world, but I don't think it's God's way. I think God's way is better expressed in 1 Peter where we read this. "Each one should use whatever gift they have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace."

That's one important principle when interpreting a passage from the Bible, to see how it compares and relates to other bits and themes of scripture. Another principle of interpretation is to look at the context, pay attention to the context in which we read the passage, but even more important, what was the context for the first hearers when they heard the story? Let's ask ourselves how the parable would've sounded to the original hearers.

First, they would've known what a talent was. A talent for them wasn't a skill or a gift. It was a lump of metal, of precious metal, and it was very valuable. One talent was worth about 20 years' worth of the average laborer's income. In other words, the money in this story is an extraordinary sum that only the very wealthiest could ever afford.

The original hearers would've known how such an extraordinarily wealthy landowner had amassed their wealth. They'd made money lending to the farming poor at exorbitant interest and stripping them of the land when they fell into debt. The three slaves in the story are the wealthy masters' retainers, the middlemen who oversee the land and the workers, collect the debts, and keep the profits coming in while the master travels on business.

They would've had orders to multiply the money in any way they saw fit, putting even more pressure on the farmers. The system was corrupt and the rich continued to get richer and the poor got poorer. In this reading of the parable, the third slave is actually the hero of the story. He's the one who saw the master for who and what he truly was. He saw that the system was corrupt, and he wanted no part of it. We might say he's a whistleblower. He spoke truth to

power. He says to his boss, "I know you're a harsh man. I don't want any part of this. Here's your money back." He takes his punishment. He's called a worthless servant and he's cast aside.

In this reading, it should be noted that just two chapters later, Jesus himself, who's telling the parable, is considered worthless and cast aside at the crucifixion. The parable tells us that there is a good kind of worthless in the economy of God.

I don't know what you'd make of such an alternative reading of the parable. Maybe it jars with you. It doesn't feel right because it doesn't go and cohere with the way you've always heard it preached and understood it. In which case, I'd say be open to being surprised and challenged this Advent season. Use Advent as a season to challenge our assumptions. Advent is all about surprises, about challenging the status quo.

In Advent, we look forward to a day unknown as yet when Jesus will return at a time we don't know, like a thief in the night to establish his kingdom. Advent is meant to be unsettling. We're meant to be made to feel uncomfortable in Advent. We see that in our readings, in the Old Testament reading from Zephaniah, God says, "On that day, I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs." And he says, "Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them." Then Paul says in the epistle for today, "When the day of the Lord comes, some will be called out. They say there is peace and security. There's a status quo. Then sudden destruction will come upon them."

I encourage you to use this season of Advent to question your assumptions, to be prepared to see another viewpoint, to be open to seeing how something sounds from someone else's point of view, and to be open to seeing that there's a validity in that viewpoint as well. Be open to being surprised by the God who is always full of surprises. Amen.