

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY XI - ARE YOU READY TO GO?
Ordinary Time - Thanksgiving

Matthew 25:31, 34-40
Psalm 100

A Sermon Preached by
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists
Listen for the word of God.

Matthew 25:31, 34-40¹

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.”

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by God, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ‘for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Psalm 100²

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into God’s presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is God who made us, and we are God’s children;
we are God’s people; the sheep of God’s pasture.

Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving,
and the courts of the Lord with praise.

Give thanks to God and bless God’s name.

For the Lord is good;

and God’s steadfast love endures forever.
God’s faithfulness continues through all generations

Rev. Debra Jarvis

What do you carry? This a story about baggage, Thanksgiving, and giving thanks.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. Adapted. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

² Op. Cit., Old Testament.

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It starts with our hero Sherbert Allen Petruney. Sherbert's name was supposed to be Sydney Herbert Allen Petruney, but a hasty nurse at his birth simply wrote S. Herbert on his paperwork. Her handwriting was messy and hard to read and that's why on his official birth certificate it doesn't read "Sydney Herbert" or even "S. Herbert" but "Sherbert." Almost as unfortunate as having a name that sounds like a dessert, the initials of Sherbert Allen Petruney spell out "SAP."

So perhaps it was these two things that happened just hours after his birth that determined his destiny. He never felt quite comfortable in the world. And now, at age 37, here he was, on the afternoon of Thanksgiving lugging his red suitcase up the steps of his mother's house.

He hadn't wanted to come but his mother insisted and so he agreed on the condition that he would leave that evening. Not even twenty-four hours? So then why the suitcase? Well, Sherbert was a thoughtful man and the suitcase was filled with Christmas gifts for his mother, his brother, his sister-in-law, his niece and his nephew.

A Strange Welcome

And even though this was the house in which he grew up, he rang the doorbell. Because Sherbert felt that once you move out you really need to start acting like a guest. His brother answered the door.

"Hey, Gelato! What's up?" his brother said. His niece and nephew snickered behind their father.

Sherbert sighed. "Please, don't call me that. Especially in front of the kids."

"Oh, don't be so sensitive. Don't just stand there like an idiot. You're letting all the cold air in. Mom's in the kitchen."

Hungry for Approval

So Sherbert went into the kitchen, kissed his mother, took off his blazer, rolled up his sleeves, and asked, "What can I do to help?"

"Oh, Sherbert. Well, you can chop these carrots."

"Okay!" He was delighted. He had been watching You Tube videos on knife skills and knew just what to do. In no time he chopped the entire bag of carrots, each one exactly the same size. *Hungry for approval*, he held out the bowl to his mother. "Here you go!"

She wrinkled her brow in dismay. "Oh, no. Those are too small. What were you thinking?" She plunked the bowl down on the counter with a little snort. "Well, I guess these will just have to do."

Just then there was a beeping sound from the oven. His mother scurried over. "Aah! Turkey is done! Sherbert take out the turkey." He put on the oven mitts and opened the oven door.

The heat blasted his face and for a moment he thought, "This is the first warmth I've felt since I arrived." He grunted and strained and set the twenty-two pound bird on the counter with a thud.

His mother clasped her hands over her heart and gazed lovingly at the turkey. "Now we must let him rest."

"Oh, I'm fine," Sherbert said.

"Not you. The turkey."

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"I knew that." Sherbert pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mom, do you have any aspirin or Tylenol? I've got a bit of a headache coming on."

"You know I don't keep drugs in the house."

"Not even aspirin?"

"Oh, Sherbert, really. Go stand on the porch and get some fresh air."

Thirsty for Connection

"Well, I think I'll just go see what the kids are up to." He walked into the living room and for the first time saw his mother's ten-foot Christmas tree dripping with handmade ornaments. Ever since subscribing to the magazine *Martha Stewart Living*, his mother had put up the tree the night before Thanksgiving.

"Why do all that work," he said, "For just a few weeks?"

And this is when he remembered the gifts in his red suitcase. So he went back into the entry, opened his suitcase and took out the gifts. He carefully placed them under the tree, secretly looking up now and then to see if the kids would notice. They were sitting on the couch playing with their phones.

Thirsty for connection he sat down between them. His niece was texting so he tapped her on the arm. "Hey, kiddo! I think I just saw something under the tree for you." She looked up momentarily.

"Na-ah," she said angrily then typed furiously on her phone.

"No, right there. The striped packaged."

Without looking up she said, "No, my friend is wrong about something. Totes. Wrong."

Sherbert sighed and looked at his nephew who was making noises under his breath. "*Bwah, bwah, bwah*. Killed you all!"

"Hey, uh—bro," Sherbert said. "There's something under the tree for you."

Without taking his eyes from the screen he said, "Is it a new iPhone?"

"Uh, no."

"Then, dude, we've got nothing to talk about. *Bwah, bwah, bwah!*"

Sherbert looked over at his brother who was slouched in the Barcalounger, eating Cheetos and drinking beer, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Pass you idiot! Pass! Third and long, now you HAVE to pass."

Sherbert stood for a moment staring intently at the television. He was trying to find the score, figure out who's playing, *anything* to help him connect with his brother.

But then his mother called out, "Thanksgiving dinner is ready!" So they trudged to the dining room, the kids clutching their phones, and his brother leaving an orange Cheeto trail on the carpet.

His brother's wife called from the guest room, "I'm just answering some email. I'll be right there."

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“Well, let’s hold hands and say grace,” his mother said. Sherbert offered his hand to each kid and he suddenly felt a hard plastic whap! in each palm, because they could not let go of their phones. His sister-in-law finally arrived and his mother began.

“Awesome, Almighty, Bountiful, Beautiful, Benevolent, Compassionate, Deliverer; Everlasting, Faithful, Great, Holy, Jehovah, Loving, Marvelous, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Powerful, Quintessential, Redeemer, Savior Extremely Gracious, Yahweh God—“

“Thanks for the grub, amen!” his brother shouted. Then they all sat down.

Sherbert surveyed the table. “It’s beautiful, Mom, thanks.” And it was beautiful. The turkey was a crackling, crispy brown. The mash potatoes so light they hovered over the dish. The dressing was fragrant and tasty with equal parts crunch and equal parts soft. The yams swam seductively in a tequila/lime sauce. And even the kale salad, the bane of any denture wearer, was soft and yielding in a dressing of fine olive oil and balsamic vinegar. The brown-and-serve rolls somehow stayed warm during the entire dinner. The water with lemon slices stayed cool. The Prosecco stayed bubbly and the Oregon Pinot Noir had time to breathe and just got better with each passing moment.

The conversation however was superficial—the weather, sports, interest rates, the Kardashians. And then, out of the blue, his sister-in-law turned to Sherbert and asked, “So what’s going on with you, Sherbert?”

And at that moment he thought, “Maybe I just need to be real with them and they’ll be real with me.” So he took a sip of wine and said, “You may remember that I broke up last year with Margie. But then, I fell in love with—Andrew. But we broke up a few months ago.”

There was silence at the table. It was so silent that Sherbert could hear the bubbles popping in the Prosecco. His mother cleared her throat.

“Ahem. Well, that’s nice, dear. We go to an open and affirming church so we are an open and affirming family. Now ask your brother how he put up my big screen TV.”

His brother started to talk but Sherbert heard nothing. All he could hear was his heart pounding in his ears. He wanted to crawl under the table and stay there. But his mother stood up and said, “I think it’s time for dessert. I made something different and very special this year.”

When she returned from the kitchen she was holding a tray—a huge tray—of foiled wrapped candies.

“What? No pumpkin pie?” his nephew asked.

“No, dear. These are what I call, Bible Bonbons. Have one!” She walked around the table and held the tray for each person. Sherbert opened his first. He removed the foil and around each chocolate was a strip of parchment with writing on it. He unrolled it and read it aloud. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

So naturally they went around the table, each one opening their bonbon and reading the verse inside.

“I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.”

“I was hungry and you gave me food.”

“I was in prison and you visited me.”

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"I was naked and you gave me clothing,"

"I was sick and you took care of me."

His mother beamed. "Jesus said all those things. And I've certainly done all that, haven't I?" She motioned to all the food and drink on the table.

The rest of the afternoon dragged on with more football, more wine, more iPhones and the obligatory, second eating a few hours later. And at last it was time for Sherbert to leave. He couldn't wait to get on that plane.

Originally his brother was going to drive him to the airport, but by now, his brother and his brother's wife had had way too much to drink. "Oh, just call Uber," his brother said. And so he did.

To his surprise, his niece ran over to give him a little hug. "Goodbye, Uncle Sherbert," she said. He realized it was the first hug he received all day. She let go, gave him a mischievous grin and returned to her phone.

In minutes the Uber car arrived, driven by a man in a turban. It was warm in the car and the smell of the air freshener hanging from the mirror was too much for Sherbert. So, he opened his window and took off his pocket. When he did all the parchment pieces from the Bible Bonbons flew out of his pocket. He realized his niece had collected them and put them in there when she hugged him.

The papers fluttered into the front seat and the Uber driver picked up each one and read them aloud. "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." "I was naked and you gave me clothing." "I was sick and you took care of me." "I was in prison and you visited me." "I was hungry and you gave me food."

"Well, my family has certainly done all of that," Sherbert said bitterly.

The Uber driver was quiet—concentrating—as he merged onto the freeway. And then he said, "People are hungry and thirsty for different things. They are naked in ways that clothes can't cover. They are sick in their hearts and in their souls. And sometimes, they are in prisons of their own making."

Sherbert heard none of this. He was so filled with anger, bitterness and pain. When they arrived at the airport, he could hardly lift his suitcase. He didn't understand it. How could it feel so heavy?

He stood on the escalator and then absently looked at his watch. To his horror he realized his flight was leaving in fifteen minutes. *Leaving* not boarding! How could this have happened?? He left plenty of time. There must have been so much traffic, but he didn't even remember the ride, so caught up he was in his own thoughts.

He sprinted to Security. Thank God for TSA pre-check! Usually he just threw his bag on the conveyor belt but he found he could hardly lift it. He wondered if he was getting some kind of virus.

He could see his suitcase coming through the x-ray and reached for it. A security officer held up her hand.

"I'm sorry, sir. We're size checking all carry-ons."

"But they do that at the gate," Sherbert said.

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“Holiday traffic. We’re trying to expedite things. Could you please put your bag in the measuring box.

“I know it fits,” he said, dropping his bag through the box.

“We need to weigh it, sir.”

This was an outrage. “My flight—327—is leaving in less than fifteen minutes!” he cried.

“Please, sir.” With a deep sigh he placed his bag on the scale. The agent looked at the scale. “I’m sorry, sir, but you are carrying too much baggage. It is just is too heavy.

“I can’t miss my flight!” Sherbert said. He was close to yelling. “I must get on this plane.”

The agent just shook her head and said, “You’ll have to wait with those people over there.”

She pointed to what Sherbert thought was a motley bunch of people. A big woman with gray hair. A little boy with glasses and lime green hearing aids—in both ears. A punk looking guy with his pants half-way down his butt, a pierced eyebrow, a ring through his nose.

Sherbert was furious. But he wheeled his suitcase over to the group, thankful for the wheels because it seemed like the darn thing was getting heavier and heavier.

He stood next to the little boy with the lime green hearing aids. The boy looked up at him and said, “I yike your wed suitcase.” Sherbert, still seething wasn’t sure he heard him.

“What?”

“Your wed suitcase. I yike it.”

“Do you? Well, thank you. I like it too.”

“You’re smart to buy a wed one because then you can find it. That’s why I have gween heawing aids. So I don’t wose them.”

Sherbert had to smile. Such practicality and wisdom in one so young. He looked around. The security guards seemed busy, talking amongst themselves and stealing glances at his group.

Suddenly a flight attendant appeared and walked toward them. “Are you Glen Schuler?” she asked the little boy.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go to your airplane,” she said taking his hand. They were almost out of sight when the boy turned around and waved at him. Then Sherbert gave him a nervous smile and waved back.

And then the punk guy turned to him. “I think some of my piercings set off the alarm,” the punk guy answered. “What about you?”

Sherbert shook his head. “They said my suitcase is too heavy, but that’s ridiculous.”

The punk guy said, “Yeah, it looks okay to me. Well, whatever happens, it’s all good.” Sherbert usually hated that phrase, “it’s all good.” But something about the way the guy said it, made him believe that maybe this time it was true.

“Jason Moustakis. Please come to the security counter. Jason Moustakis.” The punk guy turned to Sherbert.

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“That’s me. Nice meeting you. Sorry—what’s your name?”

“Sherbert. Sherbert Allen Petruney.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Sherbert.” And with that Jason Moustakis hiked up pants and walked out of security.

Sherbert smiled but then looked at his watch. He drummed his fingers against his suitcase. “Please, please, call my name!” he thought. “I still have time!”

The large woman with gray hair watched him. So he turned to her and asked, “Why won’t they let you through?” he asked.

She regarded him for a moment and then took a deep breath. “It is my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes, I am taking her back to her country.” Sherbert looked around confused. “Where is she?”

“Over there. In that metal container—her ashes.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sherbert said.

“Thank you, but this is what life is like. Without pain we would not know joy. Do you know what I mean?”

Sherbert could only nod. And then over the loud speaker they heard, “Miriam Jefferson. Please come to the security desk.” The large woman with the gray hair got up off her suitcase. “I must go. Have a safe journey.”

Sherbert started to shake her hand but she folded him into a warm embrace. And then, she too, walked off toward her plane.

The security agents sneaked glances at him and shook their heads. He looked at his watch. The airport speaker system blared, “Last call for Flight 327 at Gate 16. The doors are now closing.”

And with that Sherbert realized that unless they released him in the next two minutes, he was going to spend the night at SeaTac or maybe one of those cheesy hotels on Highway 99. But then he heard over the loud speaker, “Sherbert Petruney. Please come to the security desk.”

He leaped up, grabbed his suitcase and ran to the desk.

“Let’s weigh your baggage again, Mr. Petruney.”

He placed his bag on the scale. It seemed as if days, weeks, years went by before the ticket agent raised his eyebrows and said, “It seems that your bag is lighter than we thought. Your flight is out of gate sixteen. Have a nice trip.”

Sherbert was relieved and enraged at the same time. He wanted to scream at them but he knew that was a bad idea. He just had to get to Gate Sixteen!

So he calmly walked into the main terminal and then he ran—just flat out ran—past the Starbucks and the Peet’s, the food court, the clothing stores, the Made In Washington shops. He zig-zagged through strollers and walkers and wheelchairs. He passed gaggles of giggling girls and tribes of texting teens. He jumped over crated cats and muzzled dogs. He overtook people on crutches, people with canes, women in high heels.

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In the distance he could see it—the gate sign and the big ONE SIX beckoning to him.

The overhead speaker blared, “Flight 327 is now closed.” No! He ran faster and faster sparks shooting from the wheels on his suitcase. His lungs were bursting, his chest was on fire. And in slow motion he saw the ticket agent take the black belt from one pole and pull it across to the other pole to close the entry.

“No-o-o! Wait!” he shouted. She looked up and in that instant their eyes their met, she opened her fingers, the belt snapped back. He ran faster than he ever ran in his life and this is where our story gets biblical because Sherbert Allen Petruney entered his gate with thanksgiving and praise!

He thrust his boarding pass into her hand and then he walked down the jet way and made his way to his seat. Deftly lifting his red suitcase, he gently placed it in the overhead bin. He was panting, he was sweaty and he was grateful.

As soon as they reached cruising altitude the flight attendant came up and said, “Sir, What can I get you to drink?”

“Water, please. Water. And—a cup of coffee, please.”

“Certainly.”

He unlocked his tray table. He reclined his seat just a bit. Then the captain turned off the seat belt sign. And it was when he unfastened his seat belt that he felt a little lump in his pocket. He reached in and pulled it out. One of his mother’s Bible Bonbons. He sighed heavily, the memory of the dinner coming back to him. Well, the chocolate would go well with his coffee. He unwrapped the bonbon and took out the bible verse. And he couldn’t help himself, he read it aloud.

“For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

And the woman sitting next to him, smiled and said, “Amen.”

This story was written and read by Debra Jarvis.

UCUCC: DJ

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