

## In the Key of Life

The theme for this service, “In the Key of Life,” owes its language to a musical album entitled “Songs in the Key of Life.” Released in the fall of 1976 by Stevie Wonder, the record went on to win the Grammy for album of the year. Let’s take a moment to reacquaint ourselves with one of its most popular songs.

“Isn’t she lovely? Isn’t she wonderful? Isn’t she precious?” Stevie Wonder wrote and sang these words in response to the birth of his first child—a baby girl named Aisha. Before the first minute of her life had even run its course, an awed and overwhelmed father knew his daughter was something real special. And this in spite of the fact that as a blind man Stevie Wonder couldn’t even see his daughter. In my opinion, his blindness adds depth and meaning to the song. Whether we have all our senses or not, there are moments in life when we know with all of our being that God is playing in the key of life. At those moments, the stars align and everything falls into place; life is gift sublime; everything makes sense and there are no questions; only joy and celebration. If this is how things always went, life itself would be the only scripture and sacrament we’d ever need and worship’s only purpose would be the praise of the gracious Creator responsible for it all. But where are we now? Gathered around the Bible and about to celebrate the holy meal instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Evidently life itself isn’t always enough to convince us that God is playing in the key of life.

A couple of weeks ago the opening segment of *60 Minutes* featured interviews with some of those who have had loved ones killed by COVID-19. Families with children torn apart by death and left in economic peril. Weddings cancelled by death and the funeral a fraction of its former self for reasons of public safety and health. Try telling these folks that God is playing in the key of life. For me, entering into their grief and their anger and their confusion was as devastating as coming into contact with those who had loved ones stolen away from them when the twin towers came crashing down in New York City close to twenty years ago. It was a raw and emotional experience. It’s a big part of why we gather for worship. We need scripture and the sacrament to tell us what life sometimes won’t—that God is in fact playing in the key of life. And with one in three or one in four Americans having now had a friend or family member killed by a most unwelcome viral guest, we’re going to need worship to reassure us of God’s good intentions an awful lot in the weeks and months to come. The problem is that sometimes the scriptures aren’t as clear about God’s intentions as we’d like them to be. Today’s reading from Numbers is a case in point.

In this reading, Israel does what it does so often while in the wilderness. The people of God whine and complain and moan. God and Moses are reminded that to be a leader is to be a lightning rod and God isn’t particularly fond of the experience. But then God does what good leaders don’t do. God gives in to God’s hurt feelings. God flies off the handle and sends a bunch of poisonous snakes to bite many of the Israelites to death. It certainly humanizes God well before God descends down the birth canal in the person of Jesus Christ. But if we’re looking for reassurance that God is playing in the key of life and not in the key of death this whole episode can be troubling. What are we to do when the scriptures add to our grief and our confusion and our anger instead of providing the comfort and the consolation we need?

Well, I suppose we could stop coming to worship or steer clear of the Bible whenever possible. We also could edit out the portions of the Bible we don’t like. But these aren’t good options. Worship is where the Holy Spirit makes and sustains faith, with faith being a matter of

profound consequence both now and later. As to Scripture, it's a means of grace; along with baptism, communion, and the gathered community one of the means the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain faith. And as for editing the Bible so that it coalesces with our sense of things, this would be a heresy; an act that would mark us off as a maverick and a free agent rather than a member of the holy, catholic Church and communion of saints. All things considered, when we encounter a difficult scripture, it's best to stick with it and work things through to a faith-friendly conclusion. One of the ways we do this is to isolate a scripture's main point; following the rhetoric to its intended landing as we hold onto the baby and throw out the bath water.

When it comes to our troublesome reading from Numbers, I'd say the main point is that repentance and contrition on our part will always reveal that God does in fact play in the key of life. In our reading from Numbers, when Israel confesses its sin, when Israel turns back to God in prayer, God is there with life. Rather than producing a systematic theology about how bad things come about, a sequence the Bible generally traces back to us and our sins, I'd say the main point of our reading from Numbers is that God doesn't give up on us no matter how tempting our whining and moaning and complaining might make this. As we're reminded throughout Lent, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. It's not that we won't go our own way sometimes. We will. But when the Holy Spirit brings us back through repentance and contrition God will be there; waiting to start playing in the key of life. Again, I'd say this is the main point our reading from Numbers is trying to register and it is comforting and reassuring as far as I'm concerned. But I'm just one member of the holy, catholic church and the communion of saints. Our reading from John makes it clear that other members of the Body of Christ have found additional ways to put our reading from Numbers into a comforting and faith-encouraging context. This too is an option for how to deal with difficult scriptures. We look to the wider Church and the rest of holy writ for resolutions to the problem at hand.

Now if we do look to our reading from St. John's gospel in this way, here's what we'll find. St. John looks back on our reading from Numbers and transforms the whole snakes in the wilderness episode into an episode that emphasizes how in the midst of our grief and our confusion and our anger sometimes we need symbols, hard and fast signs or emblems, to reassure us that God does in fact play in the key of life. As our reading from Numbers tells us, every time Israel repented out in the wilderness, the bronze serpent set high on a pole served to remind and to reassure Israel of God's good intentions. Israel took in this symbol, looked at this hard and fast sign or emblem, and received life and healing in return. And as St. John rightly recognizes today the cross functions in a very similar way for us. We look upon the cross, we wear the cross around our neck, we trace the cross on our forehead, we lift high the cross, we hear and read about the cross, and receive life and healing in return. The cross is the reminder that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believed in him might not perish, but have eternal life. When you get down to it, the cross is the ultimate reminder that God plays in the key of life; telling us that God will suffer and sweat and even die if it will open the door for life. And so, like Israel once did out in the wilderness, let's turn back to God and pray today; expecting life in return. Specifically, let's pray, "Jesus, keep me near the cross, for near the cross your love and mercy, your songs in the key of life, shall find our trembling souls." Amen!