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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Proper 23/B
Job 23:1-9,16-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Deep Roots, New Shoots. This is the image we are using as we step out in faith planning for our first year of ministry together.

St. James' is a parish with *deep roots* in the community. I'm still learning our history, but two immediate signs come to mind: the Nursery School and the Thrift Shop.

Both, according to what I've heard, were begun as a way to fill a need in the wider community. And so, these *deep roots* are more than just two businesses, they are a sign of the deep and long held desire of this parish to serve the community and world.

There are *new shoots* here too – we're sitting in perhaps the biggest one. I know you all have been in this church building for several years, so it may no longer feel new to some of you – but I believe it is the newest church building in the diocese and that is no small thing.

In a time and a culture in which we are told the church is dying (yes even years ago when you began planning), you all had the vision and courage to do something new, and to believe in the mission and ministry of this parish family enough to be bold in faith.

You entered your search process with boldness of faith as well, trying on new things during the interim and moving the chairs! And now here we are.

Every transition is a kind of distillation process, in which the community comes to articulate what they are seeking and hoping. A common thread that emerged in conversation with the Search Committee and vestry, and has continued with many of you since I arrived, is what I hear as desire to **go deeper**.

To go deeper into community life, to go deeper in spiritual life, to go deeper in service.

It is a hunger that makes this an exciting place to be. It is a hunger we see reflected in today's Gospel.

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A young man ran up and knelt before Jesus. He was a good person, followed all the rules, did what was expected, and was generous. And yet he felt a hunger to go deeper, he knew in his heart there was something missing and so he asked Jesus, "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

In other words, 'What must I do to share fully in the life of God, because there is a God shaped hole in my life right now?'

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

I don't know what he expected to hear. We have the benefit of knowing Jesus better than the rich young man, in some ways – because we could probably have guessed that Jesus would come up with something crazy like selling everything you own as an answer to that question – and it seems like that wasn't the answer the young man expected.

And yet. **And yet maybe it was.**

Maybe this man already knew in his heart that his possessions were in fact possessing him and that they had become a barrier between himself and God, and were tainting his relationships with others.

Maybe he asked **that** question, hoping for **that** answer, knowing that hearing it from the lips of Jesus would confirm what he already knew.

Possessions are a two edged sword. It is good to have things: a home, food on the table, favorite books, nice clothes. But in our materialistic world it can seem as if everything around us tells us that we need more. And the more we have, the more important it all becomes to us – until we spend our time, our talents and our treasure on the maintenance of what we have and the acquisition of more.

There's an even sharper sword though. Our letter to the Hebrews today tells us this, "*the word of God living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*"

This is the sword that the rich young man felt in Jesus' words. And he was shocked and went away grieving.

But **why** was he shocked and **what** was he grieving?

It is so easy to assume that he was shocked because he was told that being a wealthy, good person wasn't enough – and that he went away grieving because he didn't want to sell what he owned. And maybe that was it.

But the Gospel never actually tells us what he ended up doing.

Maybe he was shocked because Jesus saw that narrow place between *soul and spirit*, knew him fully, and still loved him.

Maybe he went away grieving not for what he was asked to give up, but for all the time he had spent being possessed by his possessions instead of the love of God which Jesus freely offered him.

Perhaps is it good to be shocked and grieving.

It wakes us up, so that we realize when Jesus speaks of eternal life and what we must do, he isn't trying to keep us out.

Jesus just shows us how it is we keep ourselves out. And he does this by handing each of us the missing puzzle piece that fills in the God shaped hole in our lives.

Because I think we do all have God shaped holes in our lives. It may not be the shape of possessions. But each of us have something in our lives that we are *too* attached to, and when we are honest with ourselves we know that those attachments, as much as the objects themselves, separate us from God.

I'm not asking you to share with me what your God shaped hole look like. But I am asking you to ask yourself – what is it that you use to try and fill that hole? What separates you and God?

Maybe our goal should be for each of us to leave here today shocked and grieving – because maybe then we would all take a close look at our God shaped holes and, like the young man, ask Jesus the questions that we already know the answers to.

That's a lot to ask I know, and realistically, for most of us it's a lifetime of work. A continuous cycle of filling in what may be many pieces in our God shaped holes.

But wherever we are in our journey, still afraid to ask the question we know the answer to, in shock, still grieving, or even rejoicing, I believe we are all called to nurture and celebrate our *deep roots* and *new shoots* as a part of this community of God.

For those of you on our mailing list you should have received in the mail this past week stewardship materials. If you did not, you can pick up a packet from the small table in the narthex next to the visitor's book stand.

There's a lot to reflect on in the materials, we designed them to invite all of us into both the spiritual and practical sides of giving. As a part of this I hope you will join the Luck of the Pot, which will be hosted by our Youth Group, on Thursday, October 22nd where we will feast together and take time to enjoy the abundant gifts of this community.

And please plan to attend church on Sunday, November 1st when we will offer our pledge cards at the altar as we celebrate All Saints Day – giving thanks for the cloud witnesses who have come before us, as we give for all those who will follow us.

Stewardship is all that I do, with all that I have, after I say, "I believe."

That's one of the definitions of stewardship I found on the website of The Episcopal Church and it's a good one—not too cheesy and to the point: we believe and then we act.

That is the story of the choice of rich young man: he believed in the Good Teacher and that led his action.

We too are believers and so it is also our story—for we are all called to choose how to use our possessions in meaningful and substantial ways—one of them being the support of this community of faith.

The next month, then, is a time to reflect on thankfulness and joy, giving and abundance, even our shock and grief. It is a time to make connections between our beliefs, our actions, and our giving.

My prayer is that this a fruitful time for all of us, that we go deep, and we hold in our hearts our *deep roots* and *new shoots* as we prayerfully consider all the ways we will give to St. James' this year.

~ AMEN ~