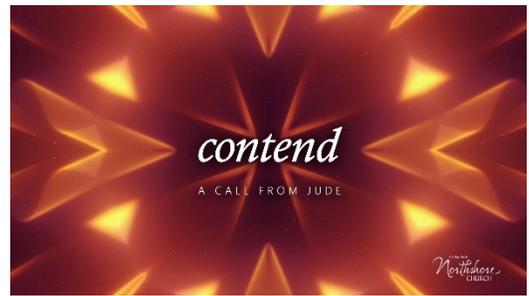


Contend

In the rhythm of our church year, this is always a special Sunday... this Sunday that follows Christmas and precedes New Years Day. We've worked through the themes of Advent, as is our tradition, but it never seems like the right time to jump back into a series, or start a new series. So... this is often a Sunday for a *one off*... sometimes an opportunity for a guest, or I bring a message that isn't part of a series. That is what you are *in for* today.



I've been thinking and praying about this (as I should) and it seems like a great opportunity to look to the New Testament Book of Jude... short, 1-chapter, mere 25-verses of Jude (although we shouldn't let that fool us; there is a lot packed in Jude). It is the last verses in Jude that are among my favorite verses in the Bible.

There is a technical term for those verses. If you are looking at a Bible with section headings, you might see it listed there; the last verses of Jude can be described as a doxology. In Scripture, there are several doxologies, short passages that proclaim the glory of God, outbursts of praise.



There are other doxologies that are part of tradition. I attended a Methodist church as a kid for a while; I remember the choir sat in the back and would sing most Sundays:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

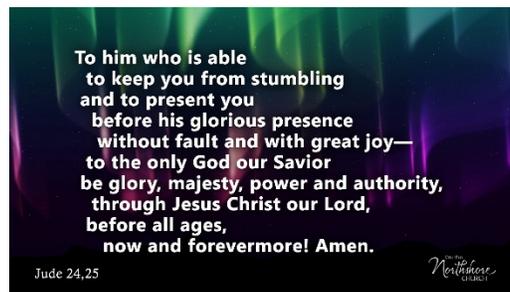
For a number of years at Pleasant Bay, and the Chapel before that, we would routinely sing as a congregation:

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Here's the doxology at the end of Jude:

²⁴To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. ¹

It contains the defining element of a doxology:
Glory to God.



glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!²

But perhaps it is the beginning that appeals to me most... since I'm concerned about me (like us all... it is okay to admit it). This doxology sneaks us in there. It starts out well enough, proclaiming "to Him" and then, like I said, it sneaks us in there, you and me.

²⁴To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵to the only God our Savior³

I am glad to know that He is our Savior... the one who is able to keep us, to welcome us into His presence now and for eternity. He is the One who can keep us from stumbling.

That is the Gospel! He is our Savior. He keeps us from stumbling. He is the Way to His presence. I am glad for every promise from Scripture that salvation, my only way to be His forever, is based on His ability, not mine.

Jude tells us that the simple Gospel was his intended point of this epistle, this word to the early church... he started, and ended that way, with the simple Gospel... but there is a middle.

Here is how Jude starts:

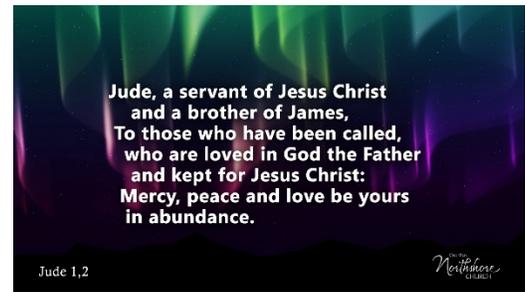
¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 24–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 24–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹ Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, ⁴

Various commentators and academics have a few different ideas about the precise identity of the author Jude; I stick with the longstanding, traditional view that this James is the same James that wrote the book of James, one of the early leaders of the church in Jerusalem, the half-brother of Jesus. Which makes this Jude not only a “servant of Jesus Christ” but a likely half-brother of Jesus too.



While both leaders of the early church, James and Jude were not among the earliest Disciples of Jesus. Apparently, it took the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as His ascension, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, for them to come to faith.

It is hard to blame them... right? Most of us have siblings. Some of us think our siblings are awesome. Others, well... the verdict is still out. But would any of us take just our brother’s word for it that they were the Son of God?

Jude wrote to the early church,

those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: ⁵

And his greeting, his hope, backed by God’s promise, for the church then, as well as us all now, is this:

² Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.⁶

That resonates with us. Peace and love... he could have added hope and joy to touch all the bases in terms of Advent themes... all of it in abundance. That resonates with this season. Our celebration was different this year, like most everyone, but one thing didn’t change: abundance. Abundant food. Abundant cheer. Abundant celebration. Our celebration welcoming Jesus again into our hearts and lives was abundant. Our hearts are full.

Like I said, Jude set out to encourage and proclaim the goodness of the Gospel. This is how he put it:

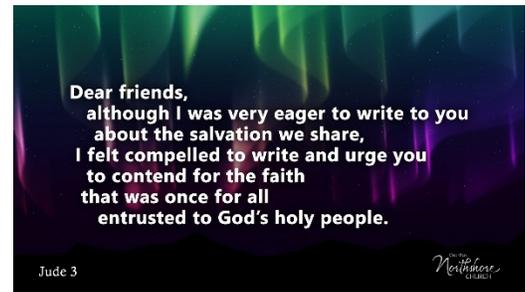
⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write⁷

I'm that kind of pastor too. I get it. I'm in the Good News business, in the rescue business, in the Gospel business... a glass half-full, positive kind of guy. I like to keep our focus on salvation, like Jude started out. But, he wrote:



I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.⁸

Contend. It is a powerful word that includes connotations of great effort and struggle; the Greek word has the same root as our English word agony (we are to agonize for the faith). The same word is translated *fight* in other places, such as when Paul urged Timothy to:

¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called⁹

It is a word associated with war in other places. So if we are in a fight, at war, with whom is it that we are contending?

These days, with COVID in the US, it seems like we church folk are contending with governors. I have a friend who has become pretty high-profile, literally contending with governors and their edicts in front of the Supreme Court (and winning, by the way; the tide has turned. It is not unconstitutional for states to make rules about COVID for everyone, but it is certainly unconstitutional for states to have special, unfounded restrictions for places of worship).

Those are fights worth having... but I wouldn't say that is really *contending for the faith* (not what Jude is talking about here); these fights are more along the lines of contending for the rights of churches and church goers (which is not precisely the same thing as contending for the faith).

Like I said, these are fights worth fighting; we should contend for our Constitutional, 1st-Amendment rights to worship and assemble.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Ti 6:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Perhaps it is ironic for me to say such a thing here from my home-office since we determined to worship online this Sunday, not at all in danger of violating any of the governor's weird rules... but while COVID concerns were part of our decision, it was more of a practical decision about deploying time and energy, especially the time and energy of our volunteers. We'll be back next Sunday, both online and in-person. We'll be safe and complying with the restrictions (well... at least complying mostly).

These are interesting days, making decisions as we navigate through all of this. Like I've said before, I think about half of all we are doing in response to COVID might work, I'm just not sure which half it is. And I know some wish we would just ignore all of the COVID restrictions, while others wish we would be more strict about it all.

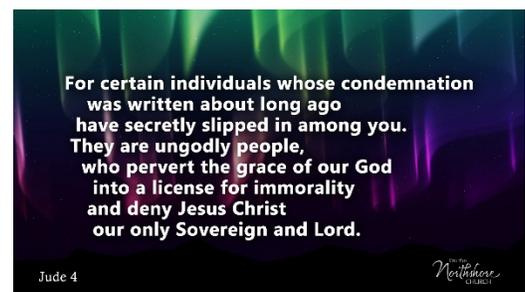
I actually don't think the tension between governors and churches is much about contending for the faith... but more about contending for style and preferences. The restrictions on singing and bands and big numbers is pretty much a problem for our style over the last generation or so. For many, many centuries of the existence of the Church, being told to keep it small and quite wouldn't have changed a thing. But these restrictions are a pain in the neck, and I'm looking forward to getting this pandemic behind us.

But I digress... literally, because from Jude's point of view, contending for the faith has nothing, at all, to do with contending with government authorities. It just isn't there.

So... what is there?

certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. ¹⁰

It wasn't a government problem; it was a people problem. It wasn't outsiders from a capitol far away, but rather insiders who were among the church.



They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. ¹¹

¹⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

More precisely than a people problem... it was a doctrine problem. It was a subtle but devastating twist on the Gospel, taking the Gospel's promise of freedom from sin and perverting it to freedom to sin. Perhaps even more precisely, it wasn't even a people problem; it was a sin problem.

The Gospel promises freedom from sin. That includes both freedom from the eternal penalty from sin, as well freedom from the current tyranny of sin. Freedom from sin includes the Truth that Jesus paid the penalty for sin with His death, His broken body, and His spilled blood. And there is freedom from sin now. When we believe, Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit is our guide and empowerer, we are free from sin. Sin is no longer our master; we are free from the tyranny of sin.



Are we free to sin? Well... I suppose we are free to sin, in some very practical ways. We continue with a free will, free to make choices, free to choose sin. As Jude's brother James put it:



We all stumble in many ways.¹²

That isn't an excuse for sin, for disobedience and selfishness and such... it is just the reality that we are not perfect, and we have an ongoing need for forgiveness.

But that is not the freedom **to** sin that Jude condemns. It was when that freedom to sin was embraced as a *license* for sin... as if sin was once forgiven and now somehow sanctioned. It is a theological manipulation to release people from any righteous obligation. It wasn't invented in Jude's time (it is as old as time), and the manipulation continues today.

Jude then sites examples. He recalls the way God's people were freed from Egypt, yet that generation did not fully believe, not trusting God's promise. They suffered for it. They didn't pay for their unbelief immediately, on the spot; God did not abandon them entirely. They suffered the consequence of their unbelief, not enjoying God's promise over 40 years. An entire generation passed away before God's people possessed God's full blessing.

Jude cited other examples, including fallen angels, and those in the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah who suffered the consequence of disobedience.

¹² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 3:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

God's call is to His higher, better place and standard... but we so easily choose our own lowly ways. Jude put it so in verse 10:

these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct—as irrational animals do—will destroy them. ¹³

It is fairly blunt, isn't it? Don't act like an animal. We are more than mere human animals, more than biology and such. We so easily just go with our animal instincts, driven by appetite... but that lowly way destroys.

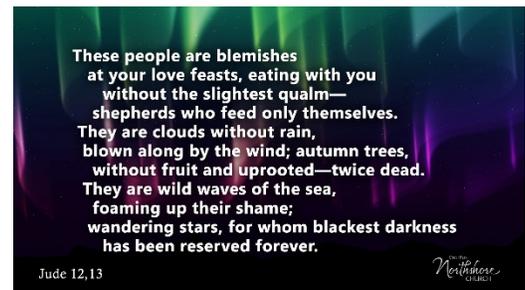
Isn't it clear? The contending wasn't with outside forces, like governments (let's not let ourselves be too awfully distracted with contending with government). Our most important contending isn't even with infiltrators that would lead us astray, or the devil and his demons. The most important, most fierce and consequential contending is contending with ourselves... contending with our own appetites and desires, our selfishness, our sin. Left unchecked, we'll never fully enjoy all that God has for us unless we so contend.

There is a miserable emptiness to the life that has misunderstood freedom from sin as a freedom to sin.

Here's how Jude described those who lead people away:

¹² These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves.

Leaders are often described as shepherds in the Bible, throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Shepherds are charged to care for and serve those in their care... but these only feed themselves. This is not leadership worth following.



They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind;

We might think clouds without rain are a good thing... but that is only because we live here and have plenty of rain. To those original readers and hearers of this word, those living in climates in which rain was precious, clouds without rain were a terrible disappointment.

¹³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

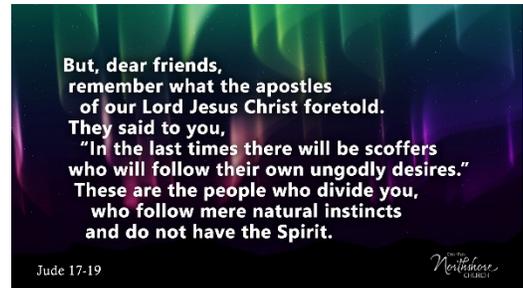
autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. ¹³ They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever. ¹⁴

Fruitless trees, seas that only bring trouble, stars with no light... these are all worthless. These are all pictures of lives ruled by freedom to sin rather than by freedom from sin.

So what are we to do? **Contend.**

¹⁷ But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁵

First rule of contending: remember what the Apostles taught. Pursue, know, and live the Truth of the Gospel.



You've probably heard how the story goes. Someone asked an expert in spotting forged cash how much time they spent studying forged cash so that they were so good at spotting it. The answer, of course, was that they spent very little time studying forgeries, rather, they spent countless hours studying the real thing. The best way to spot a forgery is to really know the real thing. So it is with the Truth of the Gospel; know the real thing... really know the real thing, and the real One who is the Way.

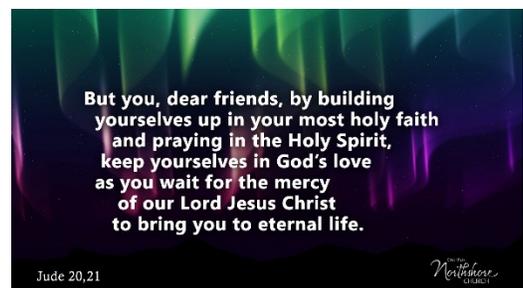
¹⁸ They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires."

¹⁹ These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. ¹⁶

Second rule of contending: choose leaders carefully. Do not follow those who scoff and divide. Do not follow those consumed with satisfying their own appetites. Do not follow those who "do not have the Spirit."

²⁰ But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. ¹⁷

"Building yourselves up" is a restatement of being devoted to the Truth, to discipleship, and study.



¹⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 18–19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 20–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

That leads to the **third rule of contenting**: Be filled, led, overflowing, baptized in the Holy Spirit. A life of freedom from sin is a life filled with the Spirit.

I read some commentators that emphasized the **praying** part of that exhortation over the “in the Holy Spirit” part; it was clearly an anti-Pentecostal bias (its okay; it didn’t hurt my feelings). I certainly appreciate the emphasis on prayer, especially prayer that is “praying out of hearts and souls that are indwelt, illuminated, and filled with the Holy Spirit”¹⁸

That is true and good... but I’m confident that Jude also meant a deep communion with God, through His Holy Spirit, that certainly includes speaking in tongues. This deep communion edifies the believer, strengthens and **keeps** the believer.

More rules for contending continue in **keeping** and **waiting**:

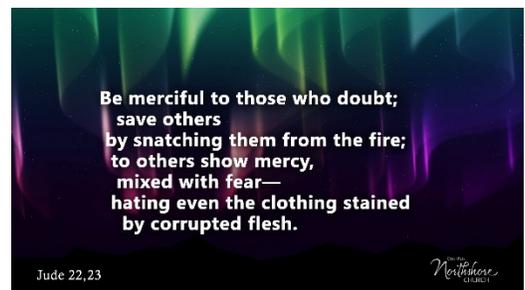
²¹ keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.¹⁹

But we are not to simply wait, huddled together in our bunkers, waiting for the Lord’s rescue. The Church is not merely Heaven’s waiting room. There are Christians like that, as there have been throughout the ages, choosing isolation and an inward-focus on their needs, preservation, and supposed holiness.

Contending for our own lives is vitally important, of course... but it can’t merely be that. We are called to contend for others as well.

²² Be merciful to those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. ^e ²⁰

It can be dangerous work... but that is what we are called to. Up close and personal... snatching folks from the fire, showing mercy, all the while guarding our hearts and lives from corruption.



This contending, contending for others as well as ourselves, might be our highest praise to God.

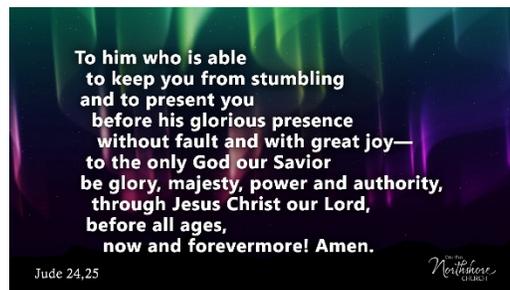
¹⁸ Pentecost, E. C. (1985). [Jude](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 923). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 22–23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁴ To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. ²¹

Let's receive and respond to God's call. As we close out 2020 and look ahead to 2021.



2021 is going to be a year of rebuilding. There are great days ahead. Days of hard work... and still a lot of days that will require patience, but there are great days ahead for 2021.

I like what I saw on my mom's Facebook yesterday, she posted a meme that said: I'm going to stay up on New Year's Eve this year. Not to see the New Year in, but to make sure this one leaves! (She was clearly quoting someone else; she doesn't stay up for New Year's Eve.)



Out goes 2020, and there will be rebuilding for 2021. Let's start with rebuilding ourselves. Let's start with a commitment to contend for the faith... our faith, and the faith of others we might reach and rescue.

Jude wrote to believers, and I suppose I've been talking mostly to believers today... but perhaps you don't think of yourself as a Christian. I'm glad you are here; please know that you are loved and cared for... and welcomed in today. Today is a day to believe. This is the good life and we welcome you to join us in this pursuit. You can begin today; take a simple step of faith with a simple prayer: Jesus, I believe. Take that step of faith. Follow it up with telling a Christian friend. Read the Bible (you could start with Jude, or perhaps the Gospel of John). And get involved with a good church... like this one.

And for all of us, this is a day to believe. Let's believe again. And let's commit ourselves again to Jesus.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! ²²

²¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 24–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jud 24–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Our Father thank you for freedom from sin. Thank You that Jesus is our Way, the One who paid the price for our sin. Thank You for forgiveness of sin, and freedom from the daily tyranny of sin. Give us gifts of strength, courage, and conviction to walk with and for you. Help us to contend for the faith... and give us gifts of opportunity and wisdom and protection as we serve to rescue others too. We thank you, in the name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.