

Sermon Proper 28C 2016

Isaiah 65:17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

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I can't speak for you, but for me, it feels like our reading this morning should have been from the Book of Revelation. Do you recall the passage that speaks of coming through the great ordeal? This week feels like we have come through the great ordeal, the great ordeal of our Presidential election. This morning some are pleased and hopeful while some are deeply shaken and fearful. And now what? Perhaps scripture has something to say to us today.

We value scripture and ask what was being said at the time? And how can scripture speak to us today?

In our gospel lesson, Jesus responded to the seemingly off handed comment made by some concerning the beauty of the Temple by saying that despite its beauty, all will be destroyed. Luke, however, is writing this gospel after Jesus' prophecy has been fulfilled. The Temple was destroyed in the Jewish rebellion of 66-70AD. The Jewish people rose up in a nationalist rebellion and tried to overthrow the Roman occupation. The Romans responded overwhelmingly and the Jewish population in Jerusalem was punished severely. In that process the Temple was destroyed. This scattered the people of Israel and had implications for early Christians as well. The persecution of Jesus' followers had begun and would be detailed in Luke's second book, the Book of Acts.

Luke is aware of this as he writes in this particular style. This genre is known as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic writing appears to be written during times of severe persecution or disaster, when the future looks bleakest. This speaks to the experiences that people of faith were having at the time. They have lost their bearings. Their religious center had been destroyed. Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus saw this coming. While chaos and repression were the order of the day, faith would endure and was not to be shaken. Apocalyptic writing comes out of a time of persecution and terror and attempts to point ahead to God's future yet to unfold.

Despite the tumult around us, Jesus encourages our faith to not to be shaken. While we have come through the election, the future is as always, uncertain. Deep divisions separate us as a society. The forces holding us in a common bond are contending forces of resistance and separation.

The election accentuated the deep divisions between us. Those divisions are stoked from many different directions. On both sides of the cultural divide certain groups, organizations and networks depend upon stoking the flames of indignation, rather than proposing solutions to the divisions that beset us. It's all or nothing. And nothing isn't an undesirable destination for some in leadership.

But government is assembled to promote the common good. Not the good of one group over another. Rather creating an environment where all may thrive.

In such unsettling times, we may be tempted to withdraw and turn inward. Our gospel calls us to let go of fear and instead reach out with the assurance of God's abiding presence with us. We are called to embody this new view/ this new vision in our lives and in our church. Our faith calls us to reach across political divisions in ever deepening relationships and connection.

Yes, there is still much violence, bigotry, prejudice, and dysfunction. Yet there is a vision as Habakkuk predicted two weeks ago. This morning Isaiah described a vision of God's work creating new heavens and a new earth. The road ahead will not magically become the "yellow brick road" but the Spirit will accompany us. The kingdom is coming.

This vision is not for some future distant place and time. The vision is being brought into existence here and now. We have a vital role to play.

As the second Letter to the Thessalonians says, we are not to lay back relax and not worry. Rather we are to be all in. Reaching out, being vulnerable.

When I consider the divine love one image stands out in my mind of how God is at work. I imagine God as a great weaver. God is at work bringing people into our lives. God is always connecting us, making bridges of relationship possible. We have to be open and willing to engage. I suspect that is how God works bringing people into our lives.

In parishes people come and go. Their journey takes them in many directions and way stations along the way of life. Last Saturday, as we gathered for Baptismal preparation ahead of the Sunday baptisms, we shared the stories of our backgrounds. The gathering was of people from Baptist, Roman Catholic,

Methodist, Episcopal and non-denominational traditions. A tapestry of backgrounds brought to St. John's at this particular time.

Jesus calls us into relationship, drawing people from far and wide and from right here at home. Jesus calls us to engage and promises to be with us to assist with what we are to say and do. Don't worry is not the Christian mantra. We aren't magically protected from the world's troubles. But God is with us and calls us to be "all in." Trusting God. Called to be vulnerable, open, at risk.

We are a community, the body of Christ in this place. Some have been here for four generations as our baptisms last Sunday demonstrated. Some have just arrived. Some come with great needs and mighty limitations. Some seem to have it all together. But that is merely on the surface and likely just for a time and a season.

In the midst of life, troubling things happen and then where will we turn? Well, we will turn to one another. Here the Spirit has built up this resilient network to sustain and support us as we go along.

Today is filled with opportunity/potential. Some will view this day as an extension of yesterday with the grudges and hatreds ever-present. But that is not the view of God's kingdom that Jesus described. Or the kingdom that Isaiah foresaw. God is with us to sustain and support us. And that will make all the difference.

As Jesus' disciples walking in the Episcopal stream of tradition, our prayer book expresses our faith. At the core of our faith is the language we spoke of last weekend as we celebrated baptisms. We asked questions of the parents and godparents, "Do you put your whole trust in Jesus' grace and love?"

Then we all joined in responding to the questions found in our baptismal covenant: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being?" To both questions we answered, "I will, with God's help."

We are called into relationship, not isolation.

Two stories of relationship:

During the cool months in the Fall and Winter there is an long standing tradition lived out on my best friend's farm in Northern Virginia. Each Saturday

morning folks gather to cut firewood. During the summer my friend and his brother go around and mark the trees that have died and need to be taken down. Then on cool Saturday mornings friends and acquaintances gather. They cut firewood in the same way that some hunt or shop or share a cup of coffee.

That gathering draws a diverse lot, racially, ethnically and economically. Some depend upon the firewood that will be cut for their heat. Some of those who come are addicted, some are having marital difficulty, some are just out of jail. Some are from families who have owned this farm and others from families who have worked on this farm for generations. Yet, there are no barriers to these gatherings.

The wood cutting of the morning is filled with conversation, sacred conversation and encouragement. And in that gathering the divine love is at work as well. Connecting people of radically different backgrounds and life experiences. Creating a community of caring and support. The morning is filled the heavy work of wood cutting and with the love and care of relationship. It is a remarkable time where lives are connected and healing can happen.

A second story of God at work this week.

The Spirit of God is active in our lives in ways we scarcely recognize. Sometimes these things happen and we get a glimpse of God's closeness, support and direction. Over the weekend, I became aware of a parishioner I was missing. Someone told me they were on a spiritual journey trying to find the church that felt right in their lives today. So, Monday morning, I wrote a note of encouragement to them, because I believe that God leads us on spiritual journeys of discernment. But I also said that I missed them nonetheless. I ended my note with this Celtic blessing.

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
 wherever he may send you,
May he guide you through the wilderness,
 protect you from the storm.
May he bring you home rejoicing
 at the wonders he has shown you,
May he bring you home rejoicing
 once again into our doors. Amen.

I put the card in the mail.

But before the card went out, only a few hours later that same day, there was a message on my phone to give this person a call. I did and we had a great conversation as I heard a part of their story. Our relationship deepened. Their journey continues but our relationship is stronger. All of it aided by the guidance of the Spirit calling us into connection and relationship.

Did God destroy the Temple? No

Did God determine the outcome of the election? No

But God is with us through it all. And with God we shall be healed and saved. We are followers of Jesus and we put all our trust in his grace and love.