

## THE GOOD NEWS INDEED!



Easter 6 / A

17 May 2020

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

“Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me.”

These words, the phrases that close this morning’s psalm, have brought me real comfort, and joy, and encouragement over the past week as I have lived with, and worked with, and prayed with these lessons. As we offer up our prayers amidst this COVID-19 crisis – perhaps more prayers than usual - I highly recommend these words to you in the week to come: “Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me.” Such good words in these trying times . . .

How great it is that our God – the same God who took on our human flesh, became one with us, and lived among us; who taught, and healed, and touched us; who was then betrayed, tortured, killed, and buried – after three days, rose again - and still, in spite of our continuing sinfulness, loves us unconditionally. And not only does our God continue to love us, our God chooses to abide with us – with us, and within us - still. In our lessons and our psalm, it’s all Good News this morning!

And with this Good News, we’re also given some good advice and helpful direction in how to share this wonderful, life-giving, and eternal-life-affirming news with others. Paul leads us by his example, helping us with that most difficult of all church concepts and directives – that dreaded “e-word” – and no, it’s not “Episcopalian”, but “evangelism”.

As The Book of Acts recounts for us, Paul, in his extensive travels, finds himself in Athens. He treats the citizens of that city with the utmost courtesy and deference. “I went through the city,” he tells them, “and looked carefully at the objects of your worship.” He didn’t stride arrogantly into their space, and begin introducing them to Jesus Christ by tearing into and tearing down what was sacred to them. Paul took the time to walk around, see who they were, and respectfully observe how they prayed. He noticed the altar to an unknown god, and he then built his message on this. Paul’s approach to evangelism isn’t strident, but softer – and it is, as the results show, nothing short of brilliant! His thoughtfulness, his grace, and his respectful, easy manner allowed the people of Athens to hear him with open minds, listen to him without erecting defensive barriers. Even all these centuries later, what a lesson this is for us. We’ve all probably had the experience of feeling diminished when someone comes into life, even our communal worship life, and immediately begins to change things without first taking the time to know us and learn about us.

I am reminded of the various times I was being interviewed for a clergy position at churches, including fifteen years ago here at Church of the Messiah – *my gosh, can it really have been that long ago!* In almost every instance, I was inevitably asked: “What will you change here at the church?” – or something along those lines. My answer was always the same: “I don’t have any intention of changing anything for at least a year. After all, how arrogant it would be of me to simply come in and start changing things, without first coming to know you, respecting who you are, and what has brought you to where you are, and who you are now. I understand that I will be the newcomer in this established community; and I trust that as I come to know you, and you come to know me, we will begin to discern together what alterations and changes we might consider, and how best to work together to accomplish them.” I know for a fact that some interviewers stopped listening at this point, and that because of this approach I was cut from further consideration for some positions. I know this is true because I was actually told so in more than one after-the-fact critiques that usually began something like this: “Keith, you have so much to offer a church, and a parish will be blessed to call you . . . but . . .”

But, this is Paul’s way. And, I honestly believe, this is the right way, for this, it seems to me, is the way of love, and honor, and respect. Take the time to investigate the history of a place, or an institution, or a people. Learn about the things that are sacred to them. Appreciate the things that others hold dear, even if these things eventually need to be dusted off, reviewed, and perhaps eventually changed, or updated, or even discarded. Remember, above all else, that God chooses to abide with us, and within us – each and every one of us. And this demands that we treat each other thoughtfully and, as Peter says, with gentleness and reverence.

In this morning’s Gospel, Peter continues offering to his hearers - and to us – as he has been doing in all the Gospels over the past several Sundays - a look at what our life might be like as we follow Jesus. While today’s readings sound, overall, like very Good News, Peter reminds us that Good News doesn’t

automatically mean an easy life. Human nature will always be - well, human - with all the foibles and sinfulness, joys and sadness, sickness and health, death and life that living in the natural world brings. No matter how hard we may try to do good, we have our weaknesses, and blind spots, and misunderstandings to contend with, and we all, despite our best intentions, will fall into sin – sometimes deliberately, often unintentionally.

The thing that might seem most odd, or even unfair, to us is that even when we do right, we may often suffer for it. It's not terribly reassuring to hear that when we suffer for doing good, it's really a blessing. After all, suffering is never pleasant, whether it's as simple as having our feelings hurt, or it's the ultimate price of losing our lives. The Christian Church has long held up the martyrs as examples to be emulated, told and glorified the stories of those who have lost their lives for their faith – sometimes gory, frightening stories that make us cringe just thinking of what they suffered. And martyrdom is not an ancient, dead practice – *pardon the pun*. We have martyrs even today who have lost their lives for the sake of their faith. Archbishop Romero of San Salvador was shot and killed at the altar while celebrating the Eucharist by those who hated the poor. And we have people like Mother Teresa who lived among and cared for the poorest of the poor; a life of self-denial and, at times, self-doubt.

We do good, but sometimes we will suffer for it. It doesn't seem right; doesn't seem fair. And yet, it is so. What keeps us from just giving up, giving in, and caring only for ourselves? It has to be the focus of our readings today: love. It has to be the understanding that God loves us; and that God's love is not a shallow, fickle, fleeting emotion, but a deep, abiding state of being.

God's abiding love is our strength and comfort in suffering, as well as in joy. So often we're tempted to wonder where God is when disaster strikes. We hear people ask: where was God when the tsunami struck Japan, or the earthquake leveled Haiti, or Hurricane Marie destroyed Puerto Rico, or Katrina claimed so many lives in New Orleans, or the World Trade Center collapsed? We wonder where God is when tornados tear ragged, killing wounds across our nation's heartland, or wildfires rage in our western states, or flash floods that carry young Amish children to their deaths, as happened last week in Kentucky. And we may well be asking: Where is God in the midst of this world-wide pandemic? We may question how God could let something like this happen. Some will even ask: Did God, who claims to love us, make it happen as some divine punishment? Or, at the very least, why did God not prevent it from claiming innocent lives?

For some, these questions may even be too hard to think upon or wonder about. After all: Where could we possibly go for comfort if our God were to abandon us like that?

What our passages today remind us is that the heart of God is always here with us, here within us. Our God always rejoices with us, and, in difficult times, suffers with us. The abiding, strengthening heart of

God wraps us in love and compassion when very human things or natural things threaten to overwhelm us. And that divine, ever-constant love can, if we will have the eyes to see, often be realized in those very real, very human good works we receive from those around us. A letter from an American woman living in Japan shortly after the Fukushima nuclear disaster speaks eloquently of the love that overcomes suffering:

“The Japanese themselves are so wonderful,” she wrote. “I come back to my shack to check on it each day, now to send this e-mail since the electricity is back on, and I always find food and water left in my entranceway. I have no idea from whom, but it is there. Old men in green hats go from door to door checking to see if everyone is OK. People talk to complete strangers asking if they need help. I see no signs of fear. Resignation, yes, but fear or panic, no.”

This is nothing less than God’s abiding love being poured out from person to person, heart to heart. Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them orphans, and they would also be sent an Advocate to be with them forever. God doesn’t cause our suffering; instead, God gives us gift after gift, often delivered through human agents, to help us deal with both the joys and the troubles of life. The blessings Peter talked about include God’s presence abiding in each and every one of us. God’s most Holy Spirit stays with us, no matter how we behave. God is always here to help, to guide, comfort, and love.

This morning, it is all Good News! We are blessed. We are loved. We are held close in our God’s embrace. So, we can reach across the centuries and, with the ancient, but ever faithful, words of the psalmist we can say with rejoicing:

Bless our God, all you peoples;  
make the voice of his praise to be heard;  
Who holds our souls in life,  
and will not allow our feet to slip.  
Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer,  
nor withheld his love from me

These are, indeed, good words!  
This is, indeed, Good News!  
Alleluia! Amen.