

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 25 June 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“Fear no one . . . Do not fear . . . Do not be afraid.” Three times in our short reading from the Gospel of Matthew in today’s Liturgy of the Word Jesus tells the disciples – and us – not to be afraid. These words are used many times in the Old Testament and in the New Testament (in all four Gospels, most often in Matthew). Most of these times either God or Jesus is the speaker. Richard Rohr ofm tells us, “When an angel of God breaks into human life, the first words are invariably, ‘Do not be afraid.’” And most of the times, either in words and by gestures, God or Jesus adds another phrase, “For I am with you.”

Fear is a strong emotional reaction to a perceived imminent danger characterized by a fight, flight, or freeze response. It can be real or imagined, rational or irrational, normal or abnormal. Our Creator God designed these natural emotions within us (and within many other-than-human beings as well) as one of the ways in which we protect ourselves. But God does not intend us to be always fearful. Instead, God promises to be present with us in our times of fear. This God who promises to be present to us is described by Walter Brueggemann with a “credo of five adjectives that continually recurs in the Hebrew Scriptures: This God that Israel – and Jesus – discovered is consistently seen to be ‘merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving, and steadfast in love.’”



***The Prophet Jeremiah***  
**Michelangelo (Sistine Chapel)**

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah poignantly describes the terror in his life as even his close friends turn against him, whispering negatively about him. In his fear, Jeremiah finds hope in God’s presence as a “dread warrior” (Jer 20:11). He trusts God because God “sees the heart and mind” (Jer 20:12), knows Jeremiah’s suffering, and will be faithful in response to the trust Jeremiah shows. Jeremiah cries out in thanksgiving, “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!” (Jer 20:13). God understands the fear that Jeremiah is experiencing, and Jeremiah knows that God will be present to him in his fear. Jeremiah also reminds God that his fear arises from his response to God’s call, “to you I have committed my cause” (Jer 20:12).

The psalmist echoes these same themes. It is because of the response to God’s call that the psalmist is now being persecuted, “It is for your sake that I have borne reproach . . . become a stranger to my kindred . . . zeal for your house has consumed me, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me” (Ps 69:7-9). The psalmist goes on to speak with certainty about God’s steadfast love, steadfast help, and abundant mercy for all who are oppressed, those who seek the Lord, and those who are in need. And like Jeremiah, the psalmist sings praises to God for being present always. Even more, the psalmist calls on all creation to join in singing these praises since God is ever present with them too, “Let heaven and earth praise God, the seas and everything that moves in them” (Ps 100:34).

Both Jeremiah and the psalmist remind God, in no uncertain terms, that they are in fear because they have been doing God’s work! I love this simple little poem by Father J. Janda which speaks in God’s voice and startles us by saying that sometimes we surprise God:

And why did I make you?  
and why do I keep you in life?  
because I love you  
because I want you to be happy  
because I want to surprise you  
because I want you to surprise me

Jeremiah and the psalmist likely surprised God with their words. When have you surprised God by your words or actions recently?



Paul's letter to the Romans focuses on one of our greatest fears as humans, death. He reminds us that death and sin have been part of our entire history as humankind. God sent the Son to become human in order to take away the dominion of sin and death. God has always been present to us, but in the coming of Jesus, God chooses to be present as one of us. With this incarnation, the work of co-missioning has new meaning. John Foley sj says, "Each of us is created to be a place where God's love can dwell." Richard Rohr ofm notes, "One great idea of the biblical revelation is that God is manifest in the ordinary, in the actual, in the daily, in the now, in the concrete incarnations of life." And Paula D'Arcy expresses so poignantly, "God comes to us disguised as our life."

In the passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continues his direction to the disciples, to those whom he co-missions to continue the live the good news. In this passage, Jesus reminds them that accepting the invitation to be missionary disciples (using Pope Francis' words) will come at a cost. It is in these words that Jesus repeats the words, "Fear no one . . . Do not fear . . . Do not be afraid." The sense of repetition is even more pronounced in the original Greek since the exact same words are used three times while the English and Spanish translations change the phrases slightly.

Jesus is not saying that following him will be easy or without struggle. Being a Christ-follower means following one



whose only ministry led to crucifixion. Jeremiah and the psalmist knew that following the Lord would come at a cost. But God does not ask us to walk alone. In his words to the disciples, Jesus speaks about the sparrows who have such little value in the eyes of people – “sold for a penny” (Matt 10:29) yet are so valued by God who gives them their amazing wings to keep them from falling to the ground. In the same way, God cares so much for us, knowing even the number of the very hairs our head. This image of the sacred web of life – sparrows and humans together – is used to show how God truly cares.

It is surprising that Jesus says we humans are of more value than many sparrows. I cannot believe that this is meant literally. Jesus is saying that the way in which sparrows are valued so little (sold for a penny) is just as misleading as believing that humans are more highly valued than sparrows or other-than-humans. All of us are valued in the sacred communion of creation, beings created and sustained by a God who never ceases to love us, accompanied by the Son of God who is present to us in our joys and in our sufferings and in our fears, and empowered by the Spirit who pours wisdom and courage into our hearts.

We bring our reflections together in this prayer from the Presbyterian pastor, Thom Shuman:

When we are filled with loss and despair, you gladden our hearts with your hope.  
When everyone around us turns a deaf ear,  
    you lean over and put your hand to your ear, to hear our cries.  
There is no love like you, Compassionate God.

When we long to continue in sin, you call us to live with you in the kin-dom of God.  
When we have fallen, our souls parched by death, you lift us up, holding us tight to your heart,  
    carrying us to drink at the deep well of living water.  
There is no grace like you, Brother of the hopeless.

When the world would stuff our pockets with fears,  
    you turn them inside out, and fill them with the smooth stones of hope.  
When we see nothing on the horizon of life, you hold up the sign which reads 'follow Jesus!'  
When we are weakened by our foolish choices,  
    you strengthen us with joy overflowing from your heart.  
There is no peace like you, Spirit of wisdom.

God in Community, Holy in One, there is no one like you in our lives.

Let three phrases echo in our hearts  
this week.

***How am I surprising God every day?  
How am I a place  
where God's love dwells?  
When do I hear and trust  
God's constant words to me –  
do not be afraid?***

And remember – find the smooth stones  
of hope in your pockets!

