

Pentecost 19 October 11, 2020 proper 23

This weekend marks our state holiday of “Indigenous Peoples’ Day” and in recognition of this commemoration, I thought it would be a good thing to remember that Good Shepherd in Barre is located on the land of the Abenakis, the First People or First Nation of this region. The Abenakis called this region *Ndakinna*, “our land,” and they were also known as *Wôbanakiak*, “people of the dawn land.” Specifically, the area around Barre was in the hunting region of the Cohass band of the Abenaki. In the mid eighteenth century, these first peoples were mostly driven off the lands here by land speculators and settlers from the British settlements to the south. One thing I learned recently is that the Abenaki language is “holophrastic,” which means that an entire sentence can be express in a single word. These example that Wikipedia uses in this regard is the Abenaki term for "white man" *awanoch* is a combination of the words *awani* meaning "who" and *uji* meaning "from". Thus, the word for "white man" literally translates to "Who is this guy and where does he come from?" So as we gather, even over the internet, today we will do so in an acknowledgement of the Territory:

Here we congregate on the hunting grounds of the Cohass band of the Abenaki people, also known as *Wôbanakiak*, “people of the dawn land.” Where we now gather, generations gathered long before Europeans landed on these shores. The original inhabitants of this land, took seriously the Creator’s call to be stewards of air, land, water, and creature. This morning we pray our thanks for their conservancy; we exist in this place because of the lessons they continue to teach. Let us come before the Creating One as we offer our prayers, hear holy story, and sing sacred songs.

The holy stories we hear this morning are rather difficult. They remind me of an introduction by Bob Weir, a member of the rock group “The Grateful Dead.” As the group finished one sad song, and began to move into another, Weir can be heard commenting, “From a song about tragedy impending, we will now sing a song about tragedy narrowly averted. It’s another in our long list of tragedy songs...” The story from Matthew’s Gospel is certainly a story about tragedy impending: Jesus

tells the strange parable of the wedding banquet, strange in that at first the king finds that no one will come to the feast for his son, indeed the invited guests scoff and even mistreat and kill the slaves the king sent to summon them to the feast. And in his anger the king kills them and burns their city and instructs his remaining slaves to go to the highways and the byways and to fill the banquet hall with guests, which they do. With the hall filled, the king notices one guest without a wedding robe, and orders him to be seized, bound and cast into the outer darkness. Jesus draws the lesson from this parable that “many are called but few are chosen.” Indeed, this is certainly a story of tragedy impending, soon to fall heavily on this one unprepared wedding guest, and in that choice Matthew phrase, soon there will be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth!

The story from the Exodus of the golden calf is the story of tragedy narrowly averted. The people of Israel, after their deliverance from Pharaoh’s slavery and bondage in Egypt, after God provided for them, giving them bread and meat, when they longed for the fleshpots they left behind, giving them water when they were thirsty, still the people strayed from God. While Moses was up on the mountain, impatient and ungrateful, the people demand that his brother Aaron should make gods to go before them, and the sacrifice their gold for Aaron to form a golden calf for them to worship. So of course, God Almighty, who had delivered them from Pharaoh’s tyranny and oppression, God almighty who had led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, God was angry with this stiff-necked people and God’s wrath is kindled to wipe them out. Moses, though, Moses intervenes, once more delivering the people, once more leading them out of a hard and narrow place, moving God from the destruction of the people to their preservation, that they might become a people to worship God and so the nations the glory of God’s loving kindness. Moses’ intervention narrowly averts the tragedy about to befall the people of Israel.

So what are we to make of these tragedies, both impending and narrowly averted, that we hear this morning? Certainly this year, with the pandemic, with the economic chaos, with the continued urgent work

for racial reconciliation, and of course, with a depth of political polarization we have rarely seen before in our nation, tragedies certainly seem to be impending. Now with over 200,000 dead from the pandemic, with the President just out of the hospital earlier this week, and more and more of our sisters and brothers, both in our nation and around the world seemingly on a downward slope into further poverty and even starvation, and especially the toll this will take on the younger generations, that impending tragedy seems to have arrived, and the weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth appear to be right over the horizon. Indeed, it appears like a cruel and arbitrary action, like the king inviting all to the feast even though they were not originally considered worthy, but now one man who was invited is thrown out, for although he was called he was not chosen, so his fate is that outer darkness.

But perhaps this impending tragedy can be narrowly averted: just as Moses interceded for the people of Israel even in insight of their unfaithfulness and stiff necked ways, so might we also work to change the course we are set on as well. Part of this has to do with our faithful action; putting our faith into action. All around the nation this Sunday, congregations like ours are literally putting Faith in Action on their agenda by holding “Voter Sabbaths,” to encourage our participation in the upcoming elections. As I mentioned last Sunday, all registered Vermonters should have received a ballot by now, and it is your responsibility to help do your part to avert tragedy by becoming involved and voting. This is our means to intercede just like Moses and to deliver our people from the unfaithfulness and the tragedy we face. Our votes, using our voices to put our faith in action is one small, small but extremely important way for us to do this. This is not a partisan issue: I will never endorse a political candidate from the pulpit or in any way as a pastor, and Vermont Interfaith Action, our local affiliate of the national organization Faith in Action, has a strictly non-partisan approach to our get out the vote effort. It is not a partisan issue, but it is a critical issue for our faith, using our ballots to make a claim for the values we hold dear from our understanding of Jesus’ Good News. So please, please vote to help avert the tragedies we now face together.

There is, however, something even deeper than simply tragedies impending or narrowly averted. Earlier this week during our Bible Study, Bill Crowther, one of our co-Junior Wardens, mentioned that some years ago he was given a Bible that was in his family for years. Although he didn't think that his family had been particularly religious, going through the Bible he found a piece of paper and on it was written out the text of Philippians chapter 4, verses 4 through 9, the lesson we heard read just a few minutes ago. Bill said that he hoped this verse had given comfort to someone in his family, like maybe his grandfather who lived through the Great Depression, that this Biblical passage spoke a word of peace and hope to someone living through a difficult time. Indeed, Paul, in this letter to the Church at Philippi, provides even more than hope for his sisters and brothers: Paul gives them a testimony that even while we find ourselves in the midst of difficulty and struggles, and who better to exemplify this as he was thrown into prison over and over, had various illnesses, was beaten and driven out of town multiple times, and even shipwrecked, Paul undergoes all these and more. Yet in the midst of all this, Paul is joyful, rejoicing in God's loving care for him in Jesus Christ, because he is not worried, he is not afraid; no, Paul lives in the depth of the peace of God which passes all understanding, a peace that will keep his heart and mind in Christ Jesus. In the midst of difficulty and struggle, Paul's testimony to the sisters and brothers at Philippi is that the truth, what is honorable and serves justice, what is pure and pleasant, what is commendable, excellent and praiseworthy, these are to be center in his life and bring him peace, a peace he now shares with those early Christians at Philippi, our spiritual ancestors, and that Paul now shares with us today in the midst of the struggles and difficulties we face in our own day.

Yes, there are tragedies, tragedies impending and tragedies that might be narrowly averted, and I am not suggesting that we downplay those tragedies or simply ignore them. I do believe, though, that our faith and the example of Paul give us a basis for facing these difficulties and struggles in an approach that will open us up to seeking honor and peace, to seek what is commendable and praiseworthy to find the way to

bring the peace of Christ Jesus into our lives and our life together in our community. It is not easy, but our faith, that faith Paul proclaims, is one which in his times under the oppression of the Roman Empire, or in our times with an unchecked pandemic, economic pain for many, and national discord and racial strife, this faith in God's love given to us in Christ, this is a faith that moves us to joy, to an openness of heart and mind to God and to our brothers and sisters, those in need and those we are called to love as God loves us, we are called by God to live in the fulness of God's love as we face together these struggles, and as we rejoice, rejoicing always in God, keeping the great gift of love in Jesus always before us and moving us deeper, joyfully into the peace that surpasses all understanding. May God's Spirit of Love, may the fellowship of our sisters and brothers, may the example of our spiritual ancestors lift our hearts and minds this day and in the time yet to come, letting us rejoice in the fulness of God's love and moving us deeper into God's justice and peace. Thanks be to God for this great grace in our lives through Jesus our savior. Amen.