

Pentecost Last November 26, 2023 proper 29

For the first time in months there was good news coming from the Holy Land, or at least news that was not as horrific as what we have seen for the past seven weeks. Israel and Hamas finally agreed, with the intervention of the Qataris, the governments of Egypt and Jordan and the guidance of the Biden administration, agreed to a four day truce and the release of hostages and already about 80 Palestinians and 26 Israelis and 15 workers from Thailand and the Philippines have been returned. In addition, more badly needed aid, food, water, medicine and fuel has reached the people of Gaza, more in the past couple of days than in the entire previous period. This truce is scheduled to last a couple of more days, so prayers and actions for peace are still called for, but thank God, this shows that a ceasefire is possible and that this bloody war can end if leaders continue to work for peace and set aside the terrible rhetoric of war and destruction. This is the way forward for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. My prayers are that those seeking peace, those striving to find a way forward through negotiations, will be strengthened by the hard work they have done and become even stronger in their efforts to secure peace for the region. It is a Thanksgiving prayer answered and certainly the way for us to prepare to move forward into Advent to welcome the Prince of Peace.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we hear your word to us this day, may we have the eyes of our hearts enlightened to carry out the hope of peace and reconciliation. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

This last Sunday of the Season after Pentecost is traditionally known as “Christ the King” Sunday, because of the Collect of the Day which opened our worship, a prayer about the “King of kings and Lord of lords.” Jesus, of course, is mocked as a king in the midst of the terrible spectacle of his crucifixion: a plaited crown of thorns, a purple robe, the color of the Senators and the Emperor, was laid on his shoulders according to Mark and John, and the placard above his head proclaimed him as the “king of the Jews.” In John’s gospel account, the religious authorities complain to Pilate about this inscription, saying that it should read, “He called himself the King of the Jews,” but Pilate brushes off their criticism saying, “What I have written, I have written.” And just like that proverbial broken clock that is right twice a day, yes Pilate got it right this time: Jesus does not called himself a king, but there on the cross Jesus manifests a type of kingship Pilate, indeed almost all seeing it, could never recognize. And that is what

grapple with this morning, as we celebrate together this feast of “Christ the King.”

As I have mentioned before, that kingship of Christ might be a particularly difficult image for us: our nation was born throwing off the rule of kings and founded on the rule of the people, as our Declaration of Independence asserts. And of course, as we see in the Hebrew Scriptures, the rule of kings was a very mixed blessing for Israel: for every wise and faithful king of Israel, there are at least two others who were greedy, power hungry, foolish or incompetent and made life miserable for the vast majority of the people. So the image of a king, especially of Christ as king, is not an easy one for us. But just as Jesus was mocked as a king at the crucifixion, so Jesus teaches his followers, teaches you and me, a very different kind of kingship: in the Gospel lesson from Matthew this morning, the coming reign of God is one in which the most marginalized, the outcasts, those who hunger, those who thirst, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners, these are the ones given a royal identity: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it, (cared for and welcomed,) to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The focus for Jesus is not on the king, but on the disinherited, the downtrodden, the dispossessed. These, the least of these, this is where Jesus draws our attention, to take care, to reach out, to see in these neighbors the very face of Christ.

This sense of kingship that Jesus shows his followers, show to you and me this morning, this sense of kingship should be very familiar to us here at Good Shepherd: it is literally in our name, it is who we are, who God calls us to be and what we aim for in striving to Become Beloved Community: to be followers of the Good Shepherd. Even deeper in the history of Israel than kingship, were the shepherds, those who took care of the flock, who watched over the sheep, bringing them to good pasture, protecting them from dangers, giving the flock the attention needed to thrive. That shepherding work laid out in the scriptures, that work of care and concern, reaching out in the Spirit of love, it is not only for our neighbors, not only for the least of these, but for all of God’s creation. This year, for this season after Pentecost, we have focused in our prayers and worship on a “Season of Creation.” A writer from Tennessee I very much admire, Margaret Renkl, wrote in her book *The Comfort of Crows*:

...it is a calamitous mistake in the Anthropocene [era] to trust that flowers blooming in the springtime and birds singing at dawn are a sign that all is right with the natural world. In truth, very little is right with the natural world...every year now, plants and animals respond

in heartbreaking ways to the devastation wrought by climate change...Winter is punctuated by warm spells that aren't due for months. Droughts burden every summer, and so do brutal flooding rains, a marriage of contradictions that belies everything we once knew about the seasons. Page 266)

After the devastating flood here in Barre this past July, after all the work of rescue and recovery, work that is still going on for us, an honest look told us that this flood is a direct result of our lack of concern for God's creation. Our misuse of resources, our easy and convenient reliance on fossil fuels, our lazy attitude toward cherishing and preserving creation, this urgently calls for our shepherding nature, our call to be Good Shepherds of the environment, both the natural environment of God's creation and the environment of our human society, to seek the welfare of all and to repent of our callous and careless ways.

That repentance, that turning from our self-centered ways and turning toward God's way, orienting ourselves toward Jesus' way of Love, that's how the Good Shepherd calls us: this is the great gift given to you and to me over these past few months in this Season of Creation: that God's glory, "may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know," as we heard from the Letter to the people of Ephesus, "so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which God has called you." "The eyes of your heart," that faith God blesses us with, a faith to see God's horizon of justice and peace, a faith that calls us to care and concern for both the least of these and for all God's creation, sustaining life and love in our midst. This faithful action, seeking to be shepherds in our community, seeking the welfare of our neighbors, especially those relegated to the margins of our society, seeking to be the shepherds and stewards of creation, this is both our hope and our joy. As this section of the Letter to the Ephesians concludes, this is, "the fullness of the one who fills all in all."

It is that fullness that shifts our attention to what is coming: next Sunday we begin the Season of Advent, looking ahead in expectation to the coming of Christ to our lives and in the life of the world. We prepare, we prepare to open our hearts to the gift of God's love. But for now, for today, we conclude this Season after Pentecost, this time of growth and harvest, this Season of Creation petitioning God's mercy to, "grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under Christ's most gracious rule," the Good Shepherd who will guide us toward the horizon of God's love, peace and justice.

Thanks be to God for this merciful grace and thanks be to Christ, our Good Shepherd in the way of Love. Amen.