

The Sunday Missive – June 11, 2023

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 455 O Love of God, how strong and true

O Love of God, how strong and true, eternal and yet ever new;
Uncomprehended and unbought,
Beyond all knowledge and all thought.

O wide-embracing, wondrous Love, we read thee in the sky above;
We read thee in the earth below,
In seas that swell and streams that flow.

We read thee best in him who came
To bear for us the cross of shame,
Sent by the Father from on high, our life to live, our death to die.

We read thy power to bless and save
E'en in the darkness of the grave;
Still more in resurrection light we read the fullness of thy might.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtVuaHpWL9M&t=66s>

The Collect of the Day

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen**

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Psalm 33

Rejoice in the Lord, all you righteous* ***It is good for the just to sing praises.***

Praise the Lord with the harp* ***Play upon the psaltery and the lyre.***

Sing to the Lord a new song* ***Sound a fanfare with all your skill upon the trumpet.***

For the word of the Lord is right* ***And all God's works are sure.***

Who loves righteousness and justice* ***Whose lovingkindness fills the whole earth.***

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made* ***By the breath of God's mouth all the heavenly hosts.***

The Lord brings the will of the nations to naught* ***And thwarts the designs of the peoples.***

But the Lord's will stands fast forever* ***And the designs of God's heart from age to age.***

Happy are those whose God is the Lord!* *Happy the people who choose to be God's own!*

Romans 4:13-25

The promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason, it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Hymn 516 Come down, O Love divine

Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;

O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till Love create a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HPKL1wOVXk>

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me."

And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw

the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Go, go! Proper 5A

One of the striking phenomena of the Wolof language, spoken in Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania is the doubling of nouns for emphasis. In English, we use double words poetically: “Long, long ago and far, far away,” to take a clichéd example. In Wolof, doubling is part of the vocabulary. Thus *Meun* is a gift, and *Meun meunu* is a deeper, more fundamental gift; a God-given gift. She doesn’t just have talent, she has talent talent.

The same thing can happen in Hebrew. To each week, a specific passage from the Bible is designated as the week’s ‘Torah portion,’ to be read aloud during worship, much as we have a Common Lectionary, only lots older. The Torah, of course comprises the Hebrew Bible’s first five books, said to be given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai for him to deliver to the people. The word *Torah* translates as “Instruction,” “teaching,” or “law.” The books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Each Torah portion has a nickname, and here’s where the doubling comes in. Our passage today from Genesis is known as Portion *Lech Lecha*, not just “Go,” as in “Go, Abram,” but “Go, go, Abram,” or “Go Abram, go!” It’s because the action Abram and Sarai take in following their faith is so radical and so courageous, it requires such emphasis to describe.

God commands them to go away from the land of their birth to an unknown destination. Such a scenario demands our most imaginative selves. Perhaps Abram and Sarai had a vision, where the heavens were opened and a voice rang out, “Go, go!” Or perhaps they were running out of food or water in the land of Ur, with enemies besetting them, or siblings taking all the inheritance,

and so they knelt down and prayed for guidance and rose up determined to go. In either case, they believed that the divine power of the universe was on their side. They didn't know just what to expect, but they believed they would be taken care of.

After all, as a wise man once pointed out, all belief is based in doubt. You cannot believe in something and also know it. You can only believe in what you don't know; that's why you have to believe it.

As the story goes, God speaks to Abram, saying "Go from the land of your birth and your ancestry and I will show you a new land that will be yours. And there I will make of you a great nation. So, they went, with all their stuff and their slaves and journeyed to the land of Canaan.

It's worth noticing that this narrative is specifically pertinent to the salvation history of the descendants of Abraham. As far as the Canaanites were concerned, the land wasn't new at all. It was old. It was 'Old Home.' They had been making milk and honey there for a thousand years. Catherine the Great called Ukraine "New Russia" for the same reason in 1764 and they're still suffering as a result. The politics in the Bible can be as unjustifiable as the science. But we have other things to learn from it.

As important as it is to consider Abram's dutiful obedience and bravery in setting out on his historic move, especially considering how far along in age they were, the deeper significance is the promise God gives of blessing. In this story, we are offered proof of the global, even universal benevolence of the Creator. All are to be blessed.

Our story is about spiritual history, not politics, about salvation and the benevolence of the Creator. Whenever we try to line up the politics, we end up justifying our worst selves. We come up with rationales like, "The ends justify the means," instead of following the commandment to love. Historically, we tend to push people to the margins, or completely out of the way when their

problems or desires or mere existence gets in the way of our plans. We may hear, “All are to be blessed,” but we stop listening.

God’s way of dealing with this proclivity is to continually speak from the margins, to teach through the voices of the outcast. Today we heard two examples of this strategy. The Torah portion *Lech lecha* – Go go! is made up of two journeys; each of them has both a physical and a spiritual component. Sarai and Abram’s leaving their native land to follow the Lord is the physical journey; the spiritual one is, perhaps subtler, but no less powerful; it is the story of the slave, Hagar.

Unable to bear children herself, Sarai – as was the custom – directs her slave Hagar to sleep with Abram and as a surrogate, bring children into the family. Predictably, when the childbearing goes well for Hagar, her relationship to Sarai goes south; so much so that Hagar flees into the wilderness to escape her owner’s jealous rage. But out there in the desert, Hagar encounters the Divine herself. God convinces her to go back and try some more to get along, which she does, at least for a while.

She is also told to name her child Ishmael, and in another parallel to Abram’s experience, she is made to believe that this child too will become the father of many nations. The future does not only belong to the powerful. To review the parallels, Hagar gets her own *Lechi, lach* (Go, go! in the feminine), God makes her a promise – to be the matriarch of many nations, and she is told what to name the child, just as Abram will later receive his son Isaac’s name from God.

This is big stuff. The only time in the Torah that God is named by a human is here, and by a woman too. Unheard of! She names God *El Ro’l*, “God sees me,” in answer to God’s naming her son *Ishmael*, “God hears.” Hagar establishes the fundamental truth of faith: God both sees and hears. The message is that God not only hears the outcast and the slave equally to the chosen and the powerful, and sees how they are treated, if anything, they have a better understanding of who God is. Revelation comes from the outsider,

the marginalized, the oppressed. The way God works here is to not only insist that the marginalized be taken care of, but also that they be listened to. God's interest is in everyone. But those who are excluded are the primary focus.

Each of today's gospel stories is about someone alienated and marginalized too. The woman with the flow of blood must – by law – keep away from family and friends. The family and friends of the dead girl are likewise forbidden to come in contact with their co-religionists just when they need them most. In each case, Jesus shatters the barriers by touching and allowing himself to be touched. He heals not only physically but spiritually too by reintegrating these marginalized people into their community and restoring their relationships.

The revelations of God's intention are most readily accessible and apparent on the margins. Instead of shunning Hagar, Sarai should have honoured her. All too soon and lastingly, God's attempt at teaching inclusiveness became instead the basis of racism. The tradition says that Ishmael's offspring are the Arabs and Muslims. But surely this is not what God intended.

Nevertheless, in the story of Abram – Abraham, Sarai – Sarah and Hagar who has no need to change, God offers a new beginning to the history of humankind. It is a salvation history, because by it, God offers the promise of blessing. The blessings unfold as the story progresses: Abram himself is set on a course that will ensure his monumental destiny. He is reconciled with all others: "I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse." And finally the full intention of God is revealed in the summation, "And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

St. Paul was adamant that this story had the widest of implications. In the conclusion, "I have made you the father of many nations," is clear that Abraham was not just the historical patriarch of the Hebrew people, but potentially of all people. "His real progeny are the faithful, not only the circumcised." Amen.

And in the Gospel Jesus plays the rabbi, sending his critics back to their books; back to Hosea 6:6 “I desire mercy,’ says the Lord.” “Go and learn,” he tells them. In Hebrew the word “mercy” is translated from *hesed*, an extraordinarily rich and significant term meaning steadfast love, righteousness, loyalty. *Hesed* appears in the Hebrew Bible as a description of God and God’s relationship with Israel, and as a characteristic of what is expected of the faithful. When Jesus tells them to “go back and learn,” he is asking the fundamental question of his existence: Does the intention and arc of God’s power call for separating ourselves from those who are different or compromised or failed, or does it demand that we draw near in love and forgiveness? That question is surely as important for us now as it was for the emerging Church in Matthew’s day.

It’s as if he was saying to them, “All the human beings you will ever see are the same and require the same treatment. If you were to ask them, “What color is your heart? What color is your mind?” They wouldn’t know. Because we are all the same spirit living in different-colored bodies and speaking different languages. We are regularly programmed – from birth to think there are differences among people. But that is wrong wrong. We are all one one. There is one oneness in diversity.

Hymn 541 Come, labor on

Come, labor on. Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain,
While all around us waves the golden grain?
And to each servant does the Master say: Go work today.

Come, labor on. Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear!
No arm so weak but may do service here:
By feeblest agents may our God fulfil his righteous will.

Come, labor on. Claim the high calling angels cannot share—
To young and old the Gospel gladness bear;
Redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly. The night draws nigh.

Come, labor on. No time for rest, till glows the western sky,
Till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie,
And a glad sound comes with the setting sun: Servants, well done.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsuXVzG3Oul>

Beyond the Question

The phoebe sits on her nest
Hour after hour,
Day after day,
Waiting for life to burst out
From under her warmth.

Can I weave a nest for silence,
Weave it out of listening,
Listening,
Layer upon layer?

But one must first become small,
Nothing but a presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird,
Proffering no slightest wish,
No tendril of a wish
Toward anything that might happen
Or be given,
Only the warm, faithful waiting,
Contained in one's smallness.
Beyond the question, the silence.
Before the answer, the silence.

May Sarton