

The Sunday Missive – June 25, 2023

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 296 We know that Christ is raised

We know that Christ is raised and dies no more.
Embraced by death, he broke its fearful hold,
And our despair he turned to blazing joy. Alleluia!

We share by water in his saving death.
Reborn, we share with him an Easter life
As living members of a living Christ. Alleluia!

The Father's splendor clothes the Son with life.
The Spirit's power shakes the church of God.
Baptized, we live with God, the Three in One. Alleluia!

A new creation comes to life and grows
As Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood.
The universe, restored and whole, will sing: Alleluia!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FhZYILUaVw>

The Collect of the Day

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 20:7-13

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"

For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten.

O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

Psalm 69

Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach* ***And shame has covered my face.***

I have become a stranger to my own kindred* ***An alien to my mother's children.***

Zeal for your house has eaten me up* ***The scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.***

Those who sit at the gate murmur against me* ***And the drunkards make songs about me.***

But as for me, this is my prayer to you* ***At the time you have set, O Lord:***

In your great mercy, O God* ***Answer me with your unfailing help.***

Save me from the mire; do not let me sink* ***Let me be rescued out of the deep waters.***

Let not the torrent of waters wash over me* ***Neither let the deep swallow me up.***

Be swift and answer me, for I am in distress* ***Draw near to me and redeem me***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDe3zq7j88>

Romans 6:1b-11

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Wonder, Love and Praise Hymn 811 Be not afraid

You shall cross the barren desert but you shall not die of thirst
You shall wander far in safety though you do not know the way
You shall speak your words to foreign men and they will
Understand; you shall see the face of God and live

Be not afraid I go before you always
Come, follow me and I will give you rest

If you pass through raging waters in the sea you shall not drown
If you walk amid the burning flames you shall not be harmed
If you stand before the power of hell and death is at your side
 Know that I am with you through it all
And blessed are your poor for the kingdom shall be theirs
Blest are you that weep and mourn for one day you shall laugh
And if wicked men insult and hate you all because of me
 Blessed, blessed are you

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2JVO460NkM>

Gospel Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus said to the twelve disciples, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Up to Our Necks in It – Proper 7A

“Rescue me, O God; the waters have risen to my neck.
I have sunk into the mud of the deep, where there is no foothold.”

In the old days, the old, old days, before Christianity and even before there were Israelites, people used to think of the World as little spots of land surrounded by water. Not only surrounded like an island, but surrounded completely, as if we were suspended in a huge, endless vastness of water, beyond measure. Most of us have swum under water at least a little bit, and we know it can be fun and interesting -- to a point. But when you start running out of air, it’s just plain Bad City, as this week’s news makes all too painfully and lamentably evident. If you’ve ever had trouble breathing – under water, under too many brothers and sisters or because you’re sick – you know it’s not a nice feeling. It is painful and very scary. And the feeling of breathing again is just Happytown.

So, it makes sense that one idea people had about water from the beginning of time was that the water is a big monster, a big powerful god that will destroy us if we don’t have help. That’s why so many sacred stories are about defeating the chaotic power of water, wherein God proves that God is God by overcoming and saving us from the chaos of too much water.

But of course, we need water too. “I am wearied with crying,” continues the psalmist; “my throat is parched; my eyes are wasted away from searching for my God.” They say that dying of thirst is not quite as frightening as drowning, but I sure don’t want to do any field research on that question.

Thus, the analogy of overwhelming water resonates with everyone. When the events of life start to seem unfathomable, frighteningly painful and far from manageable, it can feel like we will never emerge into peace and happiness again. People neglect and betray and leave us; we – or those we love – get sick and falter and die; random acts of kindness give way to random acts of violence; natural disasters occur alarmingly or devastatingly close to home. Events exceed our power to control or even affect them. We feel as if we are being drowned by life. At this point, there often is nothing we can do, there is only something we can be.

And what of all this talk in today’s lessons about dying -- Paul’s reminder that we all have to die, and Jesus’ assurance that we need have no fear of death? Among the many challenging things in our lives, whether horrific or uncomfortable or anywhere in-between, dying is surely the ultimate example of something we can’t do anything about. A big part of the confusion and soul-sickening selfishness that seem increasingly to characterize our society stems, at least in part from our successful efforts to postpone death. Each of us has the sneaking suspicion that we can live indefinitely if only we pay the closest possible attention to our health and secure the advice and treatment of the finest medical professionals. If we can’t do anything, they can. In 1960, the average life expectancy in the US of A was 70 years. Today it’s 76 and change, down from 79 thanks to Covid and politics. Seventy-year-olds are to be found on Match.com vetting one another for desirability.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ll be the first one to agree that having a ‘lotta livin’ to do’ is a good thing, and good medicine is worth finding. Solvable problems are worth doing something about. The

irony we fail to apprehend however is that lengthening our lifespans suggests that we expand our spiritual development to support us in our added vitality. We haven't conquered death, and we never will; yet with every scientific development, this truth becomes more difficult to bear in mind, let alone accept. At every crossroads, where the frustrations and sorrows of yesterday are transformed into the procedures and medical miracles of today, who we are, the content of our character becomes proportionally more important. As we do more and more about how long we live, we must be more attentive to how we treat one another. But instead we seem less and less concerned with others' experience. Those of us with the most wealth and power tend to stray ever farther from lives of spiritual accountability, selfless charity and gratitude, while taking advantage of all the miracles money can buy. Meanwhile, the growing numbers and proportion of people without wealth and power live farther and farther from any source of benefit.

Who would stand by and let this happen? Who would watch the waters rise over others' heads and do nothing but reap the rewards of selling miracles at ever higher prices? Who would try to make a case for withholding life and longevity based on wealth? Nobody good, that's who. But because our spiritual lives have not even begun to keep pace with our technological lives, we are increasingly a society ruled by nobodies.

The Hebrew word *nephesh* literally means life or soul, our essence as living beings. In Psalm 69, however, the power of the chaotic water image is so strong that translators read *nephesh* as "neck." "The waters threaten to overwhelm my soul" becomes "The waters are up to my neck." We use that image often: Do we risk our neck for something? Shall I stick my neck out for someone else, whose neck is on the block? Having your neck intact means safety and survival. Having it under water or all dried out from thirst spells doom. But your neck must be flexible, continually turning about to see how everyone else is faring and, when others – any others – are in jeopardy or privation, lending them a hand.

Otherwise, as Isaiah repeatedly exhorts, we remain a 'stiff-necked people,' whose sense of well-being and very survival is purely individual.

The great film *Casablanca* points up this paradigm with sublime irony. Humphrey Bogart's Rick Blaine, proprietor of *Rick's Café Americain* at one point declares, "I stick my neck out for nobody." Of course, the very opposite is true; the beauty of his character and of the whole story soars through the many ways he does stick his neck out, for his comrades, for peace and justice in the world and for love. He cannot erase his heartache, he cannot singlehandedly win the war against the Nazis, he cannot even change the procedure for escaping occupied French Africa. But he can send Ilsa and Victor -- his beloved and her husband -- on their way to safety, without thought of the consequences to himself.

So, how can one form of dying counteract another? The psalmist is saying what any of us might be feeling: "Save me before I die." But that is the one thing God won't do. God knows that only a dramatically heightened awareness of our human entanglement in sin, awareness of our astonishing and seemingly relentless propensity for dealing with things by ourselves and for ourselves will work on our proud personalities. We have to feel like we're drowning or dying of thirst before we'll ask for help and surrender to the process of being saved. "Go ahead, do some more research," says God, "see how long you can stay under." We can reverse the process anytime; we can concede that God is God and let her do her job. And when we do, immediately, instantaneously, "straightway," the drowning waters will recede and the Living Water will flow.

If we are to live, if we are to become 'somebodies,' we have to behave accordingly too, again and again. We begin the exercise when we are baptized. But of course we must revisit it increasingly as we mature and gain agency. We seem to have a tendency to behave as if we hadn't been baptized, as if God had never come to our assistance.

The World doesn't help us remember. There is a lot of trouble out there. A lot of people are on the brink a lot of the time. And, as the saying goes, 'just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.' On the other hand, just because the World has not become perfect doesn't mean the Gospel isn't at work. The psalmist reminds us that we are not alone, and God can take away our anger and distance anytime. People have been railing and angry and doubtful about God throughout history. Jesus preferred the company of doubters to that of believers. Understanding that Jesus recruited people capable of doubt and let the people of faith go on about their business can be very reassuring to those of us who are attracted to Jesus but cannot believe everything we've heard about him. If we can picture ourselves to be the sort of people Jesus liked to have around," (that is, disciples in the sense of learners, which includes doubters and falterers) "we may be able to hear what Jesus had to teach." After all, as Hedda Hopper famously quipped, "Nobody's interested in sweetness and light."

What he taught was this: Seek the kingdom and you will find God. Seek peace for others and you will find peace for yourself. God does not demand that we martyr our bodies, but God does require relinquishment of the heart and the will. We can have all the help with this we could ever want or need, but only if we will accept it and surrender to its truth. When we do, we can be sure that, like Bogey, in all kinds of strange places we'll have the beginnings of many a beautiful friendship.

Hymn 537 Christ for the world we sing!

Christ for the world we sing; the world to Christ we bring
With loving zeal;
The poor and them that mourn, the faint and overborne,
Sin-sick and sorrow-worn, for Christ doth heal.

Christ for the world we sing; the world to Christ we bring
With fervent pray'r;

The wayward and the lost, by restless passions tossed,
Redeemed at countless cost from dark despair.

Christ for the world we sing; the world to Christ we bring
With one accord;
With us the work to share, with us reproach to dare,
With us the cross to bear, for Christ our Lord.

Christ for the world we sing; the world to Christ we bring
With joyful song;
The newborn souls whose days, reclaimed from error's ways,
Inspired with hope and praise, to Christ belong.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW0K8gbMcHA>

The Praying Tree

Ten years of driving the same highway, past the same tree, the picture is at last complete. The eucalyptus tree and narrow birds above a blessed steel sea with no thoughts of yesterday, today, or tomorrow.

Black cormorants on bare branches spread their wings as if in prayer. A sunny day in Summerland and the tree, visible only from the highway, hides its penitent perch from cars racing by too fast.

Four wheels swerve to avoid a sheer cliff, southbound on the 101. The fat sun slides its yolk into the glass ocean. Slow down, see an empty nest of woven round sticks in the praying tree.

Birds soak in rays without fear of melanoma or the nature of forgiveness. Slick imperfections, wet wings open and close in Morse code for goodbye.

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