

Year A, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27)
November 8, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

How are you doing? It sure felt like a weight was lifted off of our nation yesterday as our Presidential election was decided. Indecision is unsettling. Just over half of the people in our country woke up a lot happier today, than they did yesterday. Just under half did not. More than half of our neighbors right here in Maine’s second district did not. We remain a closely, too often bitterly divided nation. And yet... the sun rose this morning. You woke up. You probably had breakfast. (I hope it was good). You have persevered.

Perseverance, the endurance to run that race that is set before us... that was the prayer that this election season called for, it remains the prayer that a peaceful transfer of power, that COVID times, that the climate, that racial tension and poverty, that kids trying to learn in school, that isolation, depression and anxiety are calling forth from my heart. We are not in the end times, ok, but these are harder times than this nation has collectively experienced since at least the Great Depression. We have a lot to praying, a lot of working to do. We need a lot of patience.

One of the major themes of the early church was waiting, hopeful waiting for Christ’s immanent return. It was called the *Parousia*, the waiting for Jesus, waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That is what all of the parables about being ready, about waiting, were all about. “I’ll be back.” Jesus promised this over and over again, and for the first few generations of the church, that is what they were up to, keeping it together, being prepared for Christ’s return, like tomorrow. Ok, that didn’t happen, must be tomorrow, or tomorrow and so on, for decades, seriously holding on to the immanence of Christ’s return for decades! Can you imagine? The faith to keep it going like that? Or was that just foolishness? St. Paul did say that faith and foolishness can be near impossible to tell apart.

Yet, what if we lived as if that we true? That Jesus might return tomorrow; that you will be accountable for your life tomorrow, like really? This is not about not planning for the future, it is about living with spiritual abandon, radical hope, living as if, as Mary Magdelene sings in *Jesus Christ Superstar* “Everything's alright, yes, everything's fine/And we want you to sleep well tonight/Let the world turn without you tonight...”

Living in the hope of the eschaton, the end, Jesus’ return, is not about denying the problems of the world. It is about living as if everything will be alright. It is about, you know, living in hope...

And hope is powerful medicine. With enough true Hope, we might just be confident enough to solve, to try to solve the unsolvable problems before us; we just might be brave enough to confront the really scary things in our world; with hope, we might just be strong enough to bear the burdens that we have been given to bear. It is hard to do anything with no end in sight. Hope is an end, an end in God.

That sounds really great, doesn't it? Hope. Not delusional hope "It's fine!" (it's not fine), or wishful, grasping hope, but true hope, empowering hope, "It could be" hope. This is what we mean when we speak of Christian hope, that is hope in Christ Crucified, hope in the Resurrection. That does sound pretty good.

What Matthew teaches us in today's lesson, is be prepared. Have your oil on hand. Keep alert! Sure, delays happen, and we all get drowsy, but with all our ducks in a row, that oil at the ready, when He does come, you'll promenade into the wedding banquet and everything *will* be alright, and you will sleep well that night.

Last week we heard from St. John's 1st letter, a letter, like the rest of the New Testament, that was written in chaotic, deadly times. And yet, what did John call his friends to remember? "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God..." Such hope in trying times! How do we find such hope?

By faith, right? Right! It all comes down to faith. Through faith, (by way of suffering, endurance and character, says St. Paul) comes hope, and hope does not disappoint. That kind of faith, real life changing faith, that is not very common, not from what I have seen, truly, not from what I myself have experienced. To be completely honest, when I hear that it all comes down to faith, that if you just had *enough* faith, that if you just had the *right* faith, or faith in the *right* thing; I sometimes feel lacking. If I lack sufficient faith I sometimes feel that something must be wrong with me, that my convictions are weak, that I'm off, that God missed me when faithfulness was handed out. Do you know those feelings?

Now I'm not just talking about the faith that led hundreds of Jesuits to volunteer to take the places of their martyred brothers in El Salvador. I'm talking faith to get through the much more commonplace challenges of life: getting up in the morning, doing things you need to, but don't want to do, fear, addiction, death, unhappiness, disappointment, being wronged, failure, grief, pain. When those kind of things happen in your life, is Jesus' name the first thing on your lips? Yes! Bless you. If you want it to be, one, you are not alone, and two, there is a way.

If faith doesn't arise naturally in you, or it didn't come by nature of your life experience, especially how you were raised and the experience of hardship (which are not necessarily the same thing), faith can be cultivated. Deep, real, abiding faith can be given to us by the grace of God. And there are things we can do to prepare ourselves for the gift of faith, and it is the same train you take to get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice.

There are a multitude of practices available to Christian people that lead us to an increase in faith, and by that faith, an increase in hope, and by that hope, the power to make real the Commonwealth of God right here, right now. We are doing it right now, Common Prayer, gathering together to encounter and worship the Divine is something people have always done, it is actually one of the indicators of humanity's uniqueness. There are countless forms of worship and at least as many forms of prayer we have discovered to align ourselves with the Almighty.

Worship is for most of us, the starting point. We are, most of us, exposed to it before we know anything else, certainly before most of us know the story, language and doctrines of our faith. But then we worship, we are immersed in God's Word, brought into our holy traditions, introduced to the living God in the sacraments, and are made part of the gathering of God's saints on earth, the church. If you went no further than that, you are still on the way. So yay! But (and there is always a but), in truth, what we do here is only the starting point of a life in God with Christ. Church, our corporate practice, is where we go to sip from the well. At church we learn from each other, we hear the Word of God proclaimed, seek and receive forgiveness for our sins and partake in the Living God in the Holy Sacraments. We also get to sing and usually there are cookies afterwards, not bad, church. But... And... this is just the starting point, and right now, you've probably got some time on your hands, more than you are used to. Yes, everything is harder in this time of pandemic isolation, and it promises to get harder still as winter comes, but there are so many things you can do right at home to cultivate your spiritual life, to tend to your resilience, to increase your capacity for love, for charity, and in this trying time, for hope.

So you are "at" church, fabulous. Keep zooming or YouTubing. There is the Daily Office, reading your Bible, reading other books on spiritual topics either in a class to on your own. There is praying, meditating, singing, creating, serving, fasting, feasting, feeding. My first experience of prayer came in training for marathons in the late 90s; I experienced silence for the first time. Anything we do with intention can be prayer. We need to do something to take ourselves out of ourselves and be immersed in the life and light that is God in Christ with the Holy Spirit. We can't think ourselves into faith or from faith into hope, but we can practice it.

I am in the midst of an at home retreat offered by an Ignatian group in Maine. St. Ignatius of Loyola was the 16th Century Spanish priest who founded the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. The history of the Jesuits is a mixed bag, the Inquisition is on their conscience, but that is not all that Ignatius gave the world. He also offered a set of principles, or foundations of Christian faith, and a highly developed practice to cultivate those foundations. The primary vessel of this practice is called the Spiritual Exercises. The retreat I am on is a form of the exercises that takes the standard 28 day intensive retreat and inserts it into daily life over 9 months. It is pretty awesome.

Why this is important this morning, besides being frightfully interesting, is to give a glimpse at how religious practice can concretely cultivate hope in the human heart. Ignatian spirituality is very systematic, there is progression in it, and it is also very feeling, a lot of time is spent imagining God's love, imagining what God desires for us. It is all about sensing the incredible impulse of God's love that ever shines upon us and the whole world.

The Ignatian world is based upon a spiritual foundation, a faith vision of all reality, and the practice is designed to realize it, to live into it, to make it real. Ignatius' words, besides being in Latin, are a bit dense, but there are numerous paraphrases of the foundational principles by Ignatian adepts. This is one by J. S. Bergen and M. Schwan, C.S.J.

- (1) Lord my God, when your love spilled over into creation you thought of me. I am from love, of love, for love. Let my heart, O God, always recognize, cherish, and enjoy your goodness in all of creation.
(It starts in God, and God is found in creation).
- (2) Direct all that is me toward your praise. Teach me reverence for every person, all things. Energize me in your service.
(The creation helps us serve God).
- (3) Lord God, may nothing ever distract me from your love, neither health nor sickness, wealth nor poverty, honor nor dishonor, long life nor short life.
(Do not cling to anything in this life).
- (4) May I never seek nor choose to be other than you intend or wish. Amen.
(Be content with what comes from God).

When it says "may nothing distract us", they mean it. Another paraphrase of that foundation reads, "...remain open to the possibility that love may demand of us poverty rather than riches, sickness rather than health, dishonor rather than honor, a short life rather than a long one, because God alone is our security, refuge and strength." Goodness. If you really took that in,

goodness... that is powerful. Those Jesuits who volunteered for El Salvador had that in their hearts. That is monumental faith. That is the kind of faith Jesus was talking about when he said with faith we could move a mountain to the sea. That is the kind of faith that carried Jesus to the Cross. With faith like that... everything's alright, right? With faith like that, can you imagine the hope? I want that kind of hope. To get there, I need that kind of faith. I am grateful for those who have charted a path.

What is my point in all of this? We need hope. If we are going to get through all that we need to get through, we are going to need hope. And to get to hope, real, grounded, Christian hope, we gotta have faith. And thanks be to God, and to the traditions of the church, and to the people we share our faith with, there are a lot of ways, in fact there is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
Alleluia! AMEN