

The Sunday Missive -- September 12, 2021 The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 484 Praise the Lord through every nation

Praise the Lord through every nation; his holy arm hath wrought salvation;
Exalt him on his Father's throne. Praise your King, ye Christian legions,
Who now prepares in heavenly regions unfailing mansions for his own:
With voice and minstrelsy extol his majesty: Allelujah!
His praise shall sound all nature round, and hymns on every tongue abound.

Jesus, Lord, our Captain glorious, o'er sin, and death, and hell victorious,
Wisdom and might to thee belong: we confess, proclaim, adore thee;
We bow the knee, we fall before thee; thy love henceforth shall be our song.
The cross meanwhile we bear, the crown ere long to wear: Allelujah!
Thy reign extend world without end; let praise from all to thee ascend.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy0_BiNpeLo

Collect of the Day

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee, mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens--wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Psalm 116

I love the Lord, who has heard the voice of my supplication* Has inclined an ear to me whenever I called upon God's name.

The cords of death entangled me; the grip of the grave took hold of me* I came to grief and sorrow.

Then I called upon the Name of the Lord* "O Lord, I pray you, save my life."

Gracious is the Lord and righteous* Our God is full of compassion.

The Lord watches over the innocent* I was brought very low, and God helped me.

Turn again to your rest, O my soul* For the Lord has treated you well.

You have rescued my life from death* My eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling.

I will walk in the presence of the Lord* Here in the land of the living.

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds

to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue-- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Wonder, Love and Praise Hymn 757 Will you come and follow me?

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyPCMp3nk7w>

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter

answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Sticks and Stones – Proper 19B

Our story today in Mark's Gospel depicts a turning point in the life of Jesus. Up to this point, his activities have been directed outward, in preaching and teaching and healing. Now, as the time for his Passion approaches, Jesus ministry turns to equipping and encouraging the disciples for ministries of their own. There is a sense of transition, from stupendous miracles of healing on Jesus' part, to the kinds of outcomes any of us can expect when we bear his teachings out into the world.

Certainly, Luke's Book of Acts reports physical miracles -- of healing, of retribution, of liberation – in the lives of the Apostles and those around them. These grab our attention and make for some powerful storytelling. But not many of us have personal experience with actual prison walls cracking open, enemies dropping dead, or sudden transportations in time and space. Nor do we expect these things to happen to us. The miracles we do experience are, for the most part far quieter and more modest. Their circumstances tend to be humbler and private; we don't need to tell anyone they have to keep our secrets, like Jesus did. It's often hard to convey, even to those closest to us, just how miraculous our experiences sometimes seem.

But tell we must. Instead of stories about blind folk suddenly seeing, lame folk tossing aside their crutches and dancing a jig, or the mute learning to sing arias, we may know of someone who has struggled with addiction and gets sober, someone full of self-doubt whose trust in a mentor brings blossoming transformation, someone whose instincts for generosity and kindness result in health and life for an undernourished community, someone whose study and acceptance of the way of the cross make space in their heart for peace where there was neither space nor peace before.

It's not always an easy road to these quiet miracles. The suffering and redemption we hear about in our Isaiah passage and today's psalm are part of the reality check God insists on giving all of us. Righteousness entails suffering. For example, the image we just heard from Isaiah's Suffering Servant who asserts, "I gave my cheeks to those who pull out the beard" may seem like a random or quaintly obtuse vignette. But a couple of weeks ago when we visited Oświęcim, Poland, infamously known as Auschwitz, we saw photographs of laughing soldiers pulling out the beards of their victims. Even as we pray for the souls of the oppressed and brutalized, we have to internalize the truth that the way of peace and love can be difficult, even if it's not horrendous. All too often, all too many of us want to coast into heaven without risking discomfort. But faithful speech has to be accompanied by faithful action if it is to bear fruit, and as the old hymn goes, "If you can't bear the cross then you can't wear the crown."

The letter of James, which we have been listening to for the past few weeks, describes challenges and discomforts that await all of us as would-be followers of Jesus. We may not suffer catastrophic consequences as a result of our attempts to live into our professed vows, but those attempts will require effort, often difficult effort. Here in Chapter 3, James takes up the question of restraint of tongue and pen.

Surveys show the most common reason given by those who eschew organized religion is the hypocrisy of people who call themselves Christian. As Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "Many of these people can tell you the exact details of how many times they have shown up at springs marked 'fresh water' with cups in hand, only to end up with mouths full of salt. You can remind them that no one is perfect. You can tell them that churches are made up of human beings, after all, and there is always room for one more hypocrite. They still have a point; James' point. If God's word does not show up in the flesh of a congregation – if those who hear the word do not also incarnate the word – then the tongue has worked a wicked spell on them.

‘Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?’ (Luke 6:46)”

James points out that words can do immeasurable harm if ill-considered and uncharitable. Language was one of the first gifts God gave to humans – to name those whom God had created. And from the first, there has been the power to hurt as well as to heal. Here’s Barbara Brown Taylor again on the essential untrustworthiness of the human tongue. “For all of us make many mistakes” (James3:2). “Whether we mean to or not, we construct worlds with speech. Describing the world we see, we mistake it for the whole world. Making meaning of what we see, we conflate this with God’s meaning. Then we behave according to the world we have constructed with our speech, even when that causes us to dismiss or harm those who view the world differently.”

The Letter of James is the only book in the New Testament known as Wisdom Literature. There are several in the Hebrew Bible, texts that convey sayings and learnings known to be timeless and wise. We might say they contain the philosophy that undergirds the history, prophecy and righteousness of scripture. Philo-sophy, as in love of wisdom. In parallel with the mystical legends of the Bible, Wisdom offers a way of intellectualizing religion, without changing its rules or benefits. Some of us tend to reject such guidance. “You can’t tell me how to behave; it’s a free country.” Or we take James’ admonitions as scolding warnings, suitable to specific people -- especially people we want to change. But James has a bigger agenda than to provide ammo for criticizing ourselves or others. The letter describes how language is the means by which our thinking, our acting and our circumstances interact. Language is the resulting compound when these three elements are mixed. Chapter 3 urges us to consider the power and possibilities of language – for good and ill. Gaining wisdom entails getting in the habit of considering thoughtfully and behaving charitably no matter how complicated, risky or uncomfortable the context, but especially when the temptation is to over-simplify, criticize, dismiss, escape conflict or prove oneself superior.

Mark Douglas asks, “What makes language so powerful? Or, to use James’ phraseology, what makes it possible for a member of the body as small as the tongue to boast of such great exploits? James lays out two reasons for its power. First, language acts as a kind of catalyst: a small and even ephemeral thing that makes big things happen. Second, language can be a wild thing: it does great good, but also great harm and by the latter reveals how much it is caught up in the evil of human sinfulness.

“For James, evil is not defined by consistently foul action, but by its capricious movement between the fair and foul. Likewise human beings are both made in God’s image but continually cursing and harming others. The combination of catalytic power and volatility makes fire a particularly appropriate image for James to use, and the ‘fires of Hell’ an intensely appropriate image for the way double-tonguedness both reveals and reinforces double-mindedness.”

James knows about fires. As we too know all too well here in California, big fires begin with a spark, and rage for weeks, destroying hundreds of thousands of acres of trees, homes and lives. So it is with the tongue. Its words can be like sparks themselves, setting fire to woods that have been carefully nurtured for years. Relationships slowly built can be destroyed by the wrong words said in the wrong way. How painfully difficult it can be to repair a friendship that a few ill-considered words has hurt.

But there is also a joyous playfulness in what James does with language. He uses a variety of sources and metaphors. In warning us about the danger of unmediated language, he himself makes use of language to provoke and test his listeners. It’s possible he is oblivious to this, in which case we might say, “Physician heal thyself,” but more likely is the explanation that James understands that we require needling, and he knows how to do it well.

Again, Mark Douglas wonders: “Perhaps the incongruity points to a kind of grace in language, which like all good things is a gift from God and a means by which we more clearly become creatures created in the image of the One who gives us birth by the word of truth (1:17-18). Perhaps becoming wise means, at least in part, learning to use language in ways that are both increasingly playful and increasingly pure, (to be “at play in the fields of the Lord,”) both admitting our many mistakes, and resisting the many temptations to make them.”

Only with this kind of attention to what we say can we hope to become integrated enough to fully express ourselves, to grasp and elucidate the connections, interdependencies, and resonances within our own self-experience and among the many elements of creation. James says, if we do that – if we pay attention -- we can act like our true selves. We can express what we profess. We can have the courage of our convictions. We can be the person our dog thinks we are.

Hymn 574 Before thy throne, O God, we kneel

Before thy throne, O God, we kneel: give us a conscience quick to feel,
A ready mind to understand the meaning of thy chastening hand;
Whate'er the pain and shame may be, bring us, O Father, nearer thee.

Search out our hearts and make us true; help us to give to all their due.
From love of pleasure, lust of gold,
From sins which make the heart grow cold,
Wean us and train us with thy rod; teach us to know our faults, O God.

For sins of heedless word and deed, for pride ambitious to succeed,
For crafty trade and subtle snare to catch the simple unaware,
For lives bereft of purpose high, forgive, forgive, O Lord, we cry.

Let the fierce fires which burn and try, our inmost spirits purify:
Consume the ill; purge out the shame; O God, be with us in the flame;
A newborn people may we rise, more pure, more true, more nobly wise.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkTDx---SLc>

The Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray to the Lord, saying, after each petition, as you will:
Lord, have mercy

For the holy Church of God, that it may be filled with truth and love, we pray
to you, O Lord.

For all who fear God and believe in you, Lord Christ, that our
divisions may cease, and that all may be one as you and the
Creator are one, we pray to you, O Lord.

For those who do not yet believe, and for those who have lost
their faith, that they may receive the light of the Gospel, we
pray to you, O Lord.

For the peace of the world, that a greater spirit of respect and forbearance
may grow among nations and peoples, we pray
to you, O Lord.

For those in positions of public trust, that they may learn to serve more
justly, and better promote the dignity and freedom of every person, we pray
to you, O Lord.

For better use of the riches of creation, that the world may be freed from poverty, famine, and unnatural fire and flood, we pray to you, O Lord.

For the poor, the persecuted, the sick, and all who suffer, especially the people of Afghanistan, Haiti and Louisiana and all who are made ill or destitute due to the pandemic, and all who are experiencing misery from fire and flood we pray to you, O Lord.

For this congregation, those who are present, and those who are absent, that we may be delivered from hardness of heart, and show forth your glory in all that we do, we pray to you, O Lord.

For our enemies and those who wish us harm, and for all whom we have injured or offended, we pray to you, O Lord.

For those on our prayer list: _____ and those we name now, silently or aloud: _____ we pray to you, O Lord.

For all who have died in the communion of your Church, and those whose faith is known to you alone, that, with all the saints, they may have rest in that place where there is no pain or grief, but life eternal, especially Tami and Danny, we pray to you, O Lord.

Rejoicing in the fellowship of all the saints, let us commend ourselves, one another, and all our life to Christ our God. *Amen.*

Hymn 409 The spacious firmament on high

The spacious firmament on high, with all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame, their great Original proclaim.
The unwearied sun from day to day does his Creator's power display;
And publishes to every land the work of an almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail, the moon takes up the wondrous tale,
And nightly to the listening earth repeats the story of her birth:
Whilst all the stars that round her burn, and all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings, as they roll and spread the truth from pole to pole.

What though in solemn silence all move round the dark terrestrial ball?
What though no real voice nor sound amid their radiant orbs be found?
In reason's ear they all rejoice, and utter forth a glorious voice;
Forever singing as they shine, "The hand that made us is divine."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8cARtRBFco>

May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord's face shine upon you; may the countenance of the Lord be lifted up unto you and bring you peace; and thus the blessing of God Almighty: Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier be with you this day and remain with you forever. **Amen.**

Absence

Good-night, my love, for I have dreamed of thee
In waking dreams, until my soul is lost—
Is lost in passion's wide and shoreless sea,
Where, like a ship, unruddered, it is tost
Hither and thither at the wild waves' will.
There is no potent Master's voice to still
This newer, more tempestuous Galilee!

The stormy petrels of my fancy fly
In warning course across the darkening green,
And, like a frightened bird, my heart doth cry
And seek to find some rock of rest between
The threatening sky and the relentless wave.
It is not length of life that grief doth crave,
But only calm and peace in which to die.

Here let me rest upon this single hope,
For oh, my wings are weary of the wind,
And with its stress no more may strive or cope.
One cry has dulled mine ears, mine eyes are blind,—
Would that o'er all the intervening space,
I might fly forth and see thee face to face.
I fly; I search, but, love, in gloom I grope.

Fly home, far bird, unto thy waiting nest;
Spread thy strong wings above the wind-swept sea.
Beat the grim breeze with thy unruffled breast
Until thou sittest wing to wing with me.
Then, let the past bring up its tales of wrong;
We shall chant low our sweet connubial song,
Till storm and doubt and past no more shall be!

Paul Laurence Dunbar