

**The Sunday Missive -- September 26, 2021
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Hymn 546 Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve

Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve, and press with vigor on;
a heavenly race demands thy zeal, and an immortal crown,

A cloud of witnesses around hold thee in full survey;
forget the steps already trod, and onward urge your way,

'Tis God's all-animating voice that calls thee from on high;
'tis his own hand presents the prize to thine aspiring eye,

Then wake, my soul, stretch every nerve, and press with vigor on;
a heavenly race demands thy zeal, and an immortal crown!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcDKGPD3TQo>

The Collect of the Day

O God, who declarest thy almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running to obtain thy promises, may be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell on the

camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

So the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.’ Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’” But Moses said, “The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month’! Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?” The Lord said to Moses, “Is the Lord’s power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.”

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But

they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

Psalm 124

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say* If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when our enemies attacked us,

Then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us* Then the flood would have swept us away;

The torrent would have gone over us* Then over us would have gone the raging waters.

Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth* We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;

The snare is broken and we have escaped * Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The

prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Hymn 552 Fight the good fight with all thy might

Fight the good fight with all thy might,
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right;
Lay hold on life, and it shall be thy joy and crown eternally.

Run the straight race through God's good grace,
Lift up thine eyes and seek his face;
Life with its way before us lies, Christ is the path and Christ the prize.

Cast care aside, lean on thy Guide; his boundless mercy will provide;
Trust, and thy trusting soul shall prove
Christ is its life and Christ its love.

Faint not nor fear, his arms are near;
He changeth not, and thou art dear;
Only believe, and thou shalt see that Christ is all in all to thee.

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

Mark 9: 38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of

water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Let's Talk Miracles -- Pent+18B

As James Adams has pointed out, “Modern people like us are inclined to think of miracles as temporary suspensions of the Laws of Nature, but that could not possibly have been true of the ancients. The Laws of Nature hadn't been discovered yet. A miracle was a wonder, a surprise that pointed beyond itself to a particular realization.” So we must accept that the wonders of the Bible might have been historical events, or they might have been literary devices employed to add the elements of surprise and delight to their narratives. Either way, the purpose of the miracles in these stories was to pass along to the listener the evangelists' sense of awe and wonder in considering God's presence in the world.

We think of miracles the same way today: on the one hand, concluding that since Jesus is no longer here in the flesh, Jesus is no longer performing miracles. Like Jesus did for Doubting Thomas, we remind each other that those who have not seen and yet believe are truly blessed. Just as often, we often characterize the good things that

happen to us as miracles: a new baby, an unexpected rain, straight 'A's,' a saved life, a successful operation. We long for the sense that God is taking action. Nobody is walking on water these days, not without lots of carefully photographed plexiglass and stunt people to help, but lots of things are going on that can and do remind us of God's power. When that power surprises us in a positive way, it's a miracle. Unlike in Jesus' time, lots of the Laws of Nature have been discovered by now, so most of our miracles may have scientific explanations. But God established the Laws of Nature; God is Nature. So when good things happen, we rightly attribute them to God and call them miracles, large and small. When good things don't happen, or bad things happen, we say that God is with us in them, but not that God caused them. But wait, if God is Nature, aren't natural disasters God's doing too? The truth is that God set Nature in motion, but does not intervene in its progress, just as God set human consciousness in motion but does not interfere in our behavior.

The influence God does provide, however, is plenty mighty. The stories we tell of miracles, ancient and new, are themselves the power of God at work in the hearts and minds of humankind. The stories are reminders of the goodness and possibility that exist in Creation. Good science, good planning, and good luck, not miracles are what can mitigate some natural disasters. What happens before and after natural disasters: planning, prevention, rescue, relief, rejuvenation, and hope, those are what make for modern miracles; those are the indwelling presence of the living God. Miracles result when God's presence is known.

Take, for example our psalm today, a miracle story: If the Lord had not been on our side —let Israel now say— If the Lord had not been on our side when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us. Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent gone over us; over our heads would have swept the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Like a bird, we have escaped the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we are free. The miracle is not in the winning of the war – bad guys win wars all the time – the miracle is the story that is born when whatever is won

engenders strength, hope and joy in the face of violence, mortality and fear.

The task of God's people is to tell such stories and make such meaning of them. This is why James extols prayer for the suffering, song for the cheerful, anointing for the sick, fresh starts for the sinful, because the stories created thereby will heal us. The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. And if anyone wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, whoever does the bringing back will save the sinner's soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Now about the story that we heard attributed to Jesus today, a story that seems to have lost its savor even when taken with a whole block of salt, a story about the drowning, self-maiming and immolation in store for those who stray from the ways of truth. This seems decidedly un-miraculous, as stories go, not to say off-putting and downright disgusting.

In the passage, the word we have translated as 'hell' was '*Gehenna*' in the original Greek. At the time of Jesus, Gehenna was a specific place outside of Jerusalem, that served as the city dump. In earlier times it had been a place of human sacrifice to the Canaanite God, Moloch. By making the cult site a dumping ground, the Judeans had thoroughly desecrated what had once been a sacred space for the earlier culture. We all would agree that a liturgical move away from blood sacrifice of any kind has been a good thing, whether it be human babies, rams, oxen, doves or even guinea pigs that get sacrificed. But we only have to pick up the newspaper to see what vicious and wasteful destruction so-called religious fervor can engender. It is a bad idea to dance on the graves of our enemies, or otherwise sully the achievements of others by destroying their art and architecture, even if progress or sensibility has brought their history to a close. Their stories never lose the ability to teach us.

Nevertheless, Gehenna was the city dump in Jesus' time. Its shabby present and sordid past made Gehenna's name live on to connote a place for degradation and human torment. No one can say for certain what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of Gehenna, but his hearers would certainly have felt the metaphor of the garbage dump, with its perpetually smoldering fires and rot-inducing organisms of all kinds.

His repeated use of Gehenna in our passage from Mark today tells us he wanted the image to stick, of a terrible destination in store for those who violate basic principles of responsible behavior. "...it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell, and to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." We in turn must decide whether to think of Gehenna, and Sheol and Hades as the physical residences of sinful souls, with precise criteria about getting in and getting out of them, or to think of them as Jesus and his listeners must have done, as metaphors for feelings of despair and life gone astray.

Jesus wants us to make story miracles for each other, to ponder the metaphors – to pray without ceasing -- by imagining ourselves in a world improved, set free of fear-based ugliness: whole. The ancients knew violence. They saw it regularly. So when somebody used a violence metaphor, they knew it for what it was, and that it was not real. Did Jesus use this violence as metaphor? Scholars differ. Many say that the violent images were added to Jesus stories to make them more affective, but do they?

We are at once further along and further behind. We have more than we know what to do with of technology and scientific awareness of the Laws of Nature and what's behind miracles, but far less than we need of the spiritual appetite and facility for feeding it that produces new miracle stories. So we tell each other more violent stories instead, becoming, as a people increasingly epistemologically malnourished – starved of story. Just go to the movies these days, and try to find a show that isn't filled with explosions, gunfire and blood. Almost every film seems to take place in Gehenna.

When we see violence on the tv news and on our tv shows, in our soldiers' stories and in our video games, on our cities' street corners and in our kids' graphic novels (what we used to call comic books) can we tell the difference? Is one reality and the other metaphor? Has our spiritual ability to distinguish between the two kept up with our technological ability to put the images in front of us? And if we contemplate these images all day long, all throughout our childhoods,

adolescence and young adulthood, when, oh when will we have the time and energy and emotional space and psychic room to visualize peace? If such an enormous proportion of our population spends such a large percentage of its leisure time contemplating violence – however fictional or metaphorical or specially effected, when oh when will we have time to contemplate the possibilities of a peaceful existence; to dream of a day when mutual care is more interesting than and familiar than mutually assured destruction; to imagine all the people, living for today?

There is not enough room in the human mind or heart to fully contemplate both, so whoever you are that thought these violent metaphors would help us become better, sorry, but we have to turn away from them. Not only will we not be cutting off any hands or feet, or gouging out any eyes today on the road to happy destiny, we won't be holding these images in our hearts either. We won't be imagining ourselves on the trash heap of Gehenna or the fires of Sheol or Hades or any place where anybody's worm never dies. We want to be like you, Jesus, and therefore we will be imagining ourselves like you, and dreaming of the Kingdom, where we bring our prayers to the throne and go in peace to love and serve one another. We will acknowledge the limitations of our attention and imagination and turn away from violence as metaphor, as entertainment, as frame of reference, as role model, and start dressing up like saints and talking miracles of hope instead.

The Prayers of the People – September 26, 2021

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 those 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, 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.***

Wonder, Love and Praise Hymn 763 As we gather at your table

As we gather at your Table, as we listen to your Word,
Help us know, O God, your presence;
Let our hearts and minds be stirred.
Nourish us with sacred story till we claim it as our own;
Teach us through this holy banquet how to make Love's vict'ry known.

Turn our worship into witness in the sacrament of life;
Send us forth to love and serve you,
Bringing peace where there is strife.
Give us, Christ, your great compassion to forgive as you forgave;
May we still behold your image in the world you died to save.

Gracious Spirit, help us summon other guests to share that Feast
Where triumphant Love will welcome
Those who had been last and least.
There no more will envy blind us nor will pride our peace destroy,
As we join with saints and angels to repeat the sounding joy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtPEuPwD7k8>

Hymn 344 Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing

Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing; fill our hearts with joy and peace;
Let us each, thy love possessing, triumph in redeeming grace:
O refresh us, O refresh us, traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration for thy Gospel's joyful sound:
May the fruits of thy salvation in our hearts and lives abound:
Ever faithful, ever faithful to thy truth may we be found;

So that when thy love shall call us, Savior, from the world away,
Fear of death shall not appall us, glad thy summons to obey.
May we ever, may we ever reign with thee in endless day.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NofzlODij2k>

And now, gracious God, send us anywhere you would have us go ... only go there with us. Place upon us any burden you desire ... only stand by us to sustain us. Break any tie that binds us ... except the tie that binds us to you. Make us better in whatever we do; and work in us that which is well-pleasing in the sight of all Creation. **Amen.**

Brown Girl Creed

I believe in my mother, the mother almighty,
mover of heaven and earth,
creator of daughters and dinner,
all that is always unseen,
I believe in my mother, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Pulmano,
who dreamed an American dream,
who suffered barely making ends meet,
who suffered giving everything unto everyone,
who suffered, died, and was buried;
she descended into this American earth,
while wailing women recited novena,
she ascended into heaven,
and is seated somewhere comfortable now,
she's watching the Niners game now,
she's wearing her Jerry Rice jersey,
she's got a Diet Pepsi and a plate of Panda Express,
she's watching reruns of *Murder She Wrote* and *Matlock*
if the game isn't going the way she'd like,
I believe in my mother, in the most sacred of sisterhoods,
in kapwa with the kumares, the forgiveness of fear,
her transcendence from a tumorous body,
her pink jasmines and rose bushes in bloom. Amen.

Barbara Jane Reyes