

The Sunday Missive – October 23, 2022

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 685 Rock of Ages

Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Should my tears forever flow, should my zeal no languor know,
All for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyelids close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown and behold thee on thy throne,
Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUjJhHgix4M>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Joel 2:23-32

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;

for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,

the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.

And my people shall never again
be put to shame.

Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire
and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the
moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in
Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the
Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord
calls.

Psalm 65

You are to be praised, O God, in Zion* *To you shall vows be performed
in Jerusalem.*

To you that hear every prayer shall all flesh come* ***Because of our transgressions.***

Our sins are stronger than we are* ***But you will blot them out.***

Happy are they whom you choose to dwell in your courts* ***They will be satisfied by the beauty of your temple.***

Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness* ***O God of our salvation.***

O Hope of all the ends of the earth* ***And of the seas that are far away.***

You make fast the mountains by your power* ***They are girded about with your might.***

You still the roaring of the seas* ***And the clamor of the peoples.***

Those who dwell at the ends of the earth tremble at your works* ***You make the dawn and the dusk to sing for joy.***

You crown the year with your goodness* ***And your paths overflow with plenty.***

May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing* ***May the hills be clothed with joy.***

May the meadows cover themselves with flocks* ***And the valleys cloak themselves with grain.***

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Hymn 517 How lovely is thy dwelling place

How lovely is thy dwelling-place, O Lord of Hosts, to me!
My thirsty soul desires and longs within thy courts to be;
My very heart and flesh cry out, O living God, for thee.

Beside thine altars, gracious Lord, the swallows find a nest;
How happy they who dwell with thee and praise thee without rest,
And happy they whose hearts are set upon the pilgrim's quest.

They who go through the desert vale will find it filled with springs,
And they shall climb from height to height till Zion's temple rings
With praise to thee, in glory throned, Lord God, great King of kings.

One day within thy courts excels a thousand spent away;
How happy they who keep thy laws nor from thy precepts stray,
For thou shalt surely bless all those who live the words they pray.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6fnT4gdRfo>

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Dream On -- Proper 25C

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. The sun shall be turned to darkness, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

With exceptions, it has always been the role of the young to dream, and the elders to prophesy, yet Joel makes it plain that God has plans to turn this upside down when the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Mind you, this is not Oz "The Great and Terrible," but there are some similarities. For Christians, a "great and terrible day" did come, on what we – with seeming irony -- call Good Friday when the world was turned upside down, the sky did groan and darken, and a young Galilean was tortured and killed for daring to speak truth to power. At the risk of stretching the concept of Yellow Brick Road theology any further than it can stand, we also note Jesus' repeated assertion, like that of the fellow behind the curtain, that it is our faith that makes us well. Normal, everyday people like you and me, with varying degrees of heart and brain and nerve, will indeed be well, said Jesus, if only we will call upon the name of the Lord.

In a culture left to its own devices, it is the job of the young to dream dreams, and the job of the elders to see visions. The young come up with new ideas, and the elders predict how they'll turn out. But Joel paints a different picture. When we call upon the name of the Lord, the world is turned upside down and inside out. Children become free to celebrate the new dreams of grandparents and great grandparents, and they in turn can let go of their fears enough to be counselled, educated and enriched by the visions of their children. Anything is possible in this brave new world: the wolf lies down with the lamb, the lion with the kid, and a little child does lead them.

As we arrive at the end of the letters to Timothy attributed either to St. Paul or one of his followers we hear a summation of Paul's life and work: "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

This kind of 'life review' exercise is a good one for anybody whose years on this earth are waning in number. Reflect on your life, however glorious or humble it has been. As Peter Laarman says, "We dance to the music of time, no matter how graceful our steps." Name and celebrate the talents and skills you have possessed and developed. Forgive yourself your failures and release those who have failed you. Tell your stories. Look forward to wearing the crown of righteousness. It's all important and good. And it is incumbent upon those of us who have elders to listen, understand and validate what it is they have to tell us. How can we hope to find our own development without welcoming into our hearts the experiences of those who have gone before? Soon enough, we will ourselves be the elders, with stories of our own to tell.

However – and this is a big however – as important as the process of honoring the past may be, what we've come to realize is that it is not enough. In the letter, the phrase, "I have finished the race" is part of Paul's leavetaking. Today, we are faced with a very different reality. With each passing year, worldwide birth rates are slowly declining and longevity is – with occasional exceptions -- increasing. Statistics abound. Here from a report produced by HelpAge International: "Life expectancy is now over 80 in 33 countries. Ten years ago, only 19 countries had achieved this. With one in nine persons in the world aged 60 or over, projected to one in five by 2050, population aging is a phenomenon that can no longer be ignored." It's also important to note the inequality in such advancements. In 2019 the country with the lowest life expectancy was the Central African Republic with 53 years, in Japan life expectancy was 30 years longer.

This reality comprises very real and present economic challenges, challenges that will have to be met if we are to avoid societal chaos. We cannot be like the Pharisee who stands proud and smugly self-

righteous. These challenges demand the humility of the Tax Collector, who knows how badly he needs help. As with most economic problems, there is a spiritual solution. And this is where the prophet Joel can help us more than Paul.

Because although we elders have fought many a good fight, have danced, gracefully or not so, and our visions may be of sugarplums and other things our nutritionists now tell us are bad for us, we have not finished the race. We are here to stay, longer and longer every day. And to consider people who are aging to be a problem in need of solving is like complaining that it's dark outside: before the conversation gets too far, you are on the other side of the issue. The truth is, we don't finish the race, ever. We are part of a continuum, a relay team on the roads to Zion, and we have to start acting like it. The dreams of the elders can provoke and nurture the visions of the young and transform bitter valleys into places of springs. They are our spiritual assets, not liabilities; they are our souls' treasure.

William Jennings Bryan famously said, "The Rock of ages is more important than the age of rocks." And you can hardly argue with him if you have faith in God. But you can point out that we have learned an awful lot from the age of rocks, and increasing longevity is perhaps the greatest of scientific achievements. But as with all discoveries, it's what we do with it that matters, and all of us have to be accountable.

So young people, wake up! Don't just tolerate or smile at the quaint stories of your elders, listen to their dreams. Demand of yourself the experiment of faith that considers us to be partners with each other. 'Neither Jew nor Greek, Male nor Female' now we must now add 'neither Old nor Young.' They say that babies are closer to God, because they've haven't been away so long. The longer we live, the more apparent it will become that our elders are growing closer to God themselves. We call upon the name of the Lord by paying close attention to the view they have: by seeing God's lovely dwelling place through their expanding dreams.

And Elders, dream your dreams! Understand that we are integral to the vitality and imagination of our society. Increasing awareness and expectation of death can illuminate and inspire the young, help dispel

their denial and superficiality and open their hearts to the loveliness of faith.

Increased longevity is not just a free pass to extended inactivity, it is a commission. As Thomas Cole puts it, "We have to push against the idea that learning and creativity are supposed to stop after a certain age. We have to try to grow, morally and spiritually all the way to the end." When my kids and I visit my Dad, who is 97 ½ -- we often come away with wonder and gratitude for his stated attitude: "I hope I never stop learning."

The psalmist declares, "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord, God of hosts." God's dwelling place is in the heart of the faithful, and it is lovely. "The sparrow herself finds a home, and the swallow a nest for her brood. She lays her young at your altar, O Lord, my king and my God." The other creatures of the earth don't need admonishing or discipline, they automatically know their reality. "Praise God all creatures here below," rings our doxology – but all the other creatures don't need to be told, they just do what comes naturally. In fact, they don't even enter the realm of praise because they are already at one with God's purpose for them and for all Creation. We are the ones who have the annoying, defiant and ultimately desperate tendency to separate ourselves from God and God's purposes, to make our own rules, write our own ticket, "Thanks for the life, God; I'll take it from here."

What we sing is: "They are happy who dwell in your house, forever singing your praise. They are happy, whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the roads to Zion." So why wouldn't we want to do that? Why isn't that our business all the time, whatever our living might be? What an amazing idea, that dwelling in the house of God and finding one's strength there brings happiness.

"As they go through the bitter valleys, they make them places of springs." In our hearts is a spiritual roadmap that, when followed, changes us for the better. Wherever we go the very landscape gets nicer, miracles happen and though our earthly days grow shorter the closer we get to God, the sweeter our journey becomes and the stronger our hearts. "They grow in strength as they walk; they shall see the God of gods in Zion."

The road to Zion is in our hearts by virtue of our longing for it. The road is the longing. Unlike the Pharisee, who thinks he has need of neither longing nor road, who thinks he has arrived already, the humble tax collector would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Could Jesus be any more explicit? "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Desire it and it shall be yours. Claim it as proprietary and it is gone. God will turn the expectations and paradigms of human existence on their ears, and there will be nothing certain at all except the power and love of God when that day is come. Meanwhile, the longer we are here, the more there is for us to do in exploring what our existence means and what the goodness of God is calling us to be.

LEVAS Hymn 38- The Old Rugged Cross

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

Refrain:

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left his glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see,
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

To that old rugged cross I will ever be true,
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then he'll call me some day to my home far away,
Where his glory forever I'll share.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z07w4848lvA>

[Sometimes I Don't Know if I'm Having a Feeling]

Sometimes I don't know if I'm having a feeling
so I check my phone or squint at the window
with a serious look, like someone in a movie
or a mother thinking about how time passes.
Sometimes I'm not sure how to feel so I think
about a lot of things until I get an allergy attack.
I take my antihistamine with beer, thank you very much,
sleep like a cut under a band aid, wake up
on the stairs having missed the entire party.
It was a real blast, I can tell, for all the vases
are broken, the flowers twisted into crowns
for the young, drunk, and beautiful. I put one on
and salute the moon, the lone face over me
shining through the grates on the front door window.
You have seen me like this before, such a strange
version of the person you thought you knew.
Guess what, I'm strange to us both. It's like
I'm not even me sometimes. Who am I? A question
for the Lord only to decide as She looks over
my résumé. Everything is different sometimes.
Sometimes there is no hand on my shoulder
but my room, my apartment, my body are containers
and I am thusly contained. How easy to forget
the obvious. The walls, blankets, sunlight, your love.

Matthew Siegel