

The Sunday Missive – September 15, 2024
The Seventeenth 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: Alleluia!
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: Alleluia!
Thy reign extend world without end;
Let praise from all to thee ascend.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_a-0krwIcI

The Collect of the Day

O God, forasmuch as without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and that same 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* ***And has inclined ear to me whenever I called.***

When the cords of death entangled me and the grip of the grave took hold of me* ***When 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* ***Almighty 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.***

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

I will walk in the presence of the Lord* ***As long as I am 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.

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 your self 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 prisoner 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=bvPJomB0DJ4>

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 and Words that Hurt – 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 we might bring about 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 secret our powers 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.

The road to these quiet miracles is not always an easy one. The suffering and redemption we hear about in our Isaiah passage and today's psalm are part of the reality check that Holy Scripture regularly affords us. Righteousness can -- indeed does -- entail 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 not long ago when we visited Oświęcim, Poland, infamously known as Auschwitz, we saw photographs of laughing soldiers pulling out the beards of their utterly innocent victims. Even as we pray for the souls of the oppressed and brutalized, we have to internalize the truth that our experience as faithful people can be difficult too, even if it's not horrendous like theirs. All too often, all too many of us want to hopscotch 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; it is James’ point too. 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)” Or, as we read in David French’s essay in the Pebble, what we do matters more than what we preach, and “the church that truly influences a nation will be one that focuses on doing good more than on being right.”

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. Philosophy, as in love of wisdom. In parallel with the mystical legends of the Bible, Wisdom writings offer ways 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 means of criticizing ourselves or others. The letter describes how language is a mechanism 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 through language or any other means.

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. Words can be like sparks themselves, setting fire to woods that have been carefully nurtured for years. Relationships slowly built can be destroyed by a few 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 all could use a little 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 experience and among the many elements of creation. James insists: If we do that – if we pay attention -- we can go on to act as 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 522 Glorious things of thee are spoken

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken formed thee for his own abode;
On the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

See! the streams of living waters, springing from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint, when such a river ever will their thirst assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age.

Round each habitation hovering, see the cloud and fire appear
For a glory and a covering, showing that the Lord is near.
Thus deriving from their banner, light by night, and shade by day,
Safe they feed upon the manna which he gives them when they pray.

Blest inhabitants of Zion, washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on, makes them kings and priests to God.
'Tis his love his people raises over self to reign as kings:
And as priests, his solemn praises each for a thank-offering brings.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTpali6Uhi4>

Resurrection

My friend a writer and scientist
has retreated to a monastery
where he has submitted himself
out of exhaustion to not knowing.
He's been thinking about
the incarnation a.k.a. Big Bang
after hearing a monk's teaching
that crucifixion was not the hard part
for Christ. Incarnation was.

How to squeeze all of that
all-of-that into a body. I woke
that Easter to think of the Yaqui
celebrations taking place in our city
the culminating ritual of the Gloria
when the disruptive spirits
with their clacking daggers and swords
are repelled from the sanctuary
by women and children
throwing cottonwood leaves and confetti
and then my mother rose
in me rose from the anguish
of her hospice bed a woman
who expected to direct all the action
complaining to her nurse
I've been here three days
and I'm not dead yet—not ready
at one hundred and two to give up
control even to giving up control.
I helped with the morphine clicker.
Peace peace peace the stilling
at her throat the hazel eye
become a glassy marble. Yet here she is
an Easter irreverent still rising
to dress in loud pastels
and turn me loose
in Connecticut woods to hunt
my basket of marshmallow eggs
jelly beans and chocolate rabbit
there fakeries of nature made vestal
incarnated in their nest of shiny manufactured grass.

Alison Hawthorne Deming