

The Sunday Missive September 10, 2023

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 11 Awake, my soul, and with the sun

Awake, my soul, and with the sun thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise to pay thy morning sacrifice.

Lord, I my vows to thee renew; disperse my sins as morning dew.
Guard my first springs of thought and will,
And with thyself my spirit fill.

Direct, control, suggest, this day, all I design, or do, or say;
That all my powers, with all their might,
In thy sole glory may unite.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, ye heavenly host:
Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z11F5MsG-lw>

The Collect of the Day

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the powerful who oppress and dominate creation, so you never forsake your creatures who live in harmony with nature's order; through Jesus Christ the Wisdom of Creation, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Ezekiel 33:7-11

You, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from

their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, “Thus you have said: ‘Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’” Say to them, “‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?’”

Psalm 149

Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song* ***Sing God’s praises in the congregation of the faithful.***

Let Israel rejoice in her Maker* ***Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.***

Let them praise God’s Name in the dance* ***Let them sing praises with timbrel and harp.***

For the Lord takes pleasure in the people* ***And adorns the poor with victory.***

Let the faithful rejoice in triumph* ***Let them be joyful on their beds.***

Let the praises of God be in their throat* ***And a two-edged sword in their hand;***

To wreak vengeance on evildoers* ***And punishment on the false ones***

To bind their kings in chains* ***Their nobles with fetters of iron;***

To inflict on them the judgment God decrees* ***This is glory for God’s faithful people. Hallelujah!***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeR0YOKjt-w>

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Hymn 602 Jesu, Jesu fill us with your love

Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve
The neighbors we have from you.

Kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washes their feet,
Master who acts as a slave to them. [Refrain]

Neighbors are rich and poor, neighbors are black and white,
Neighbors are nearby and far away. [Refrain]

These are the ones we should serve, these are the ones we should
Love. All are neighbors to us and you. [Refrain]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjBZd4MaMP8>

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are

not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Big Cat Country – Proper 18A

Hebrew Bible theology is, all too often, pretty murky stuff. One especially incomprehensible theme is that of the punishing, angry god, who reaches out and hurts people when they don't do what he says. However, if we expand on last week's theme, God being reality itself, it makes more sense. In fact, we hope that those who violate God's precepts: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly will, sooner or later be at least arrested and preferably corrected.

If we are to gain insight and direction from the stories of the Hebrew Bible about how to follow a life course that winds its way in the general direction of goodness, we can't simply pretend the stories make sense. We can't just read about a punishing, angry, benevolent, loving God with our fingers crossed. Neither can we dismiss them out of hand as the ravings of a primitive, ignorant culture whom we, in our wisdom have superceded. We have to hear them and glean what we can, while acknowledging that we can never fully grasp the depth of their meanings. We have to embrace their metaphors. That's why these stories persist; the Hebrew Bible is part of our scripture because it tells us about the nature of goodness. It's part of our scripture because the nature of God is portrayed in its stories. Among these is the greatest story

ever told, slightly tilted towards the male perspective. George Stevens' cast featured 47 men and eight women.

Some things are worth bearing in mind that will help in this undertaking -- pun intended; which is to say undertakers have the job of seeing the dead peacefully laid to rest. And to undertake the decoding of ancient scripture might be understood as helping us become more at peace with our human condition, so we can both live and be laid to rest a little more peacefully.

It helps to remain aware that most of the metaphors in the Hebrew Bible are not explained. Or, if they are, it's done briefly, cryptically, and often in some other chapter or book, or all of the above. So, there is no complete set of neat, pat, all-encompassing explanations of Biblical texts, despite what some folks may say, and with all due respect to the Talmud. It is important to remember that many of the folks who say the Bible is crystal clear on societal issues are the same ones who would build walls along our borders; as if this nation wasn't entirely founded on and sustained by immigrant energy, passion and labor, forced or otherwise.

In the New Testament, Jesus uses all kinds of vibrant imagery, his parables can be tricky to untangle. But he also provides clear and concise explanations of his most salient points. These points are brutally and bizarrely ignored by those who promulgate injustice and hatred while calling themselves 'Christian.' But we are neither swayed nor fooled. Violence is violence. Peace is peace. Tolerance, compassion and love for all of God's Creation are as advertised.

In the Hebrew Bible -- the Old Testament -- on the other hand, there are plenty things that lots of people still don't even begin to agree on. It helps to remember that all these stories were passed along orally, and then written down in languages and communities that are not around anymore. As adept and insightful and scientific as biblical archaeologists are, the vast majority of the information about the sources and settings of the Bible are

(however intelligently) speculative. Much of the New Testament is also of course also murky in its specific origins but the Christian movement has at least been continuous. And the historical events and theological themes depicted in these later books are far more specific and focused.

Finally, we as Christian followers have the luxury of a formula for answering all our questions about what doesn't make sense. Jesus was very good about reiterating God's purpose and nature in sojourning on the ground in Palestine: Jesus came to fulfill the law. Jesus also conveniently offered a short and sweet synopsis of what the law means: Love God with everything you've got; love your neighbor as well as you love yourself. If we are inclined to take Jesus' word, we simply refer back to that formula. If there's anything in the entire Bible – or in our interpretation of it -- that seems not to jibe with this prescription, we will have to keep ponderin' until we get how it does.

So, for example, the jealous, angry god who destroys those who don't behave. We might begin by noticing that, in the later texts, the New Testament, God doesn't actually say that much. God is not quoted very often. "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased," and "This is my child, my beloved, listen to him" are the big ones.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, the word of God frequently comes to prophets who, in turn pass along the message to whomever will listen. Now I am not here to tell you that these fellers were making all of it up; that is way above my pay grade. But I will suggest that these stories make a lot more sense in the light of what Jesus taught if we think of them as attempts on the part of passionately observant spiritual leaders to cajole, dispute with, and scare the daylights out of their people in an effort to get them to undertake the living of more peaceful and productive lives and consequently dying more peaceful deaths.

It isn't useful to talk about the jealousy, anger and violence of God unless, in every breath we reiterate that God always provides

a full and even extravagant antidote to whatever punishment or catastrophe threatens. Whatever Israel experienced in the way of ugliness, it was forever to be contrasted with beauty. Jesus comes along to make that clear. Even and especially his death -- an unjust and excruciating death -- provides an opening to glorious life.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the words we translate as 'sin' stem from hunting images: shooting arrows and missing what you're aiming at. Actions not meeting intentions are what get you in trouble. This is primeval stuff. I tell you what, if you sharpen up a long piece of hard wood, and sneak up on a sabre-toothed tiger, you've got pretty much one throw. Cuz that tiger is liable to get a little miffed once it perceives you throwing sharp sticks at it. Let me digress once more. (show and tell with the Masai lion spear). So, if sin is missing the target, then death as the wages of sin becomes much clearer concept.

God is reality. God is truth. We can stand to remind ourselves of this fact of life that the ancients understood. What made the Israelites spiritual people, and why Jesus is so adamant about fulfilling, not abolishing their frame of reference: their law, was the increasing awareness that their inner eyes beheld far more vast horizons than was possible for the flesh. They understood that a desire to do and be good was everything, that failure was ubiquitous and always brought with it the opportunity for reconciliation and new beginnings.

They discovered that the limitless possibilities of mutual care and expression -- in other words, the limitless possibilities of love -- reach far beyond the boundaries of any single life. In love, they recognized a dimension of reality that had not been hitherto acknowledged, much less explored or celebrated in ages -- if ever -- certainly since the dawn of cities and so-called civilization. The religion of Israel sought an escape from enslavement to self, and a return to the freedom of mutuality. And they concluded that only through accountability to a God who was in all ways immediate, singular and vibrant could their chosen path be followed.

The reality of that God -- the God who is the reality of Creation -- does include death, in the sense that death is part of reality. But God's reality also offers a vast universe that can only be imagined and explored when we turn our attention outward and away from the brevity of our own lives. "Make no provision for the flesh." means "by God's grace, turn away from your self-absorption."

How, then shall we approach this universal reality? In as many ways as there are of us. Matthew's formula for resolving disputes that we heard today is just a small, but telling example: If we have a problem with somebody, first we must seek the Kingdom of God, and there we will find resolution. In other words, talk it out, try to reconcile, keep the problem as small as we can; preserve the relationship by being mindful of the other's condition. If they have missed the target; don't sabretooth them. If they have disappointed us and made us feel less peaceful, pray to God for the strength to forgive them. If we must let them go or even stop them by force, do so with grace, compassion and a minimum of violence. And remember that ostracism is as just about as violent as hitting.

And if all else fails, treat them as we would a stranger, which is to say welcome, clothe, feed, shelter and pray for them, despite our discomfort. listen to their lives with attention; we do not have more important things to do. For the true working principle of God's reality -- from the earliest of the Hebrew scriptures, through the most exciting of modern postulates is that the vastness of the universe -- a vastness beyond all forms of death -- can always be seen before our eyes. The people, the creatures, the ecosystem we have been given are what we are obligated to pay attention to and to serve. Any other approach, and you and I, we're missing the mark; we're just spiritual lion bait; we're not viable, we're vittles.

Hymn 518 Christ is made the sure foundation

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone,
Chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the Church in one;
Holy Zion's help for ever, and her confidence alone.

All that dedicated city, dearly loved of God on high,
In exultant jubilation pours perpetual melody;
God the One in Three adoring in glad hymns eternally.

To this temple, where we call thee, come, O Lord of Hosts, today;
With thy wonted lovingkindness hear thy servants as they pray,
And thy fullest benediction shed within its walls always.

Here vouchsafe to all thy servants what they ask of thee to gain;
What they gain from thee, for ever with the blessed to retain,
And hereafter in thy glory evermore with thee to reign.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR9NHXnbxIU>

Long Week Talking

I am ashamed to keep thinking of death
as a chute that connects to the garbage. I know
I should picture it more like the pneumatic tubes

at banks of the past: you put in your name
and your paper and up you go. I know a bank

should be the operative metaphor
for every facet of existence, every time. I'm sorry

I haven't more regularly made reference
to a bank. When I fail to liken something to a bank,
that's how I can tell I'm tired. That's not me,

I assure everybody. That's the long week talking. Time
for bed. Time for the window, the hectoring sky,

the streetlight bright as the brightness saved people
see before they die, but I don't die.

Natalie Shapero