

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT on June 9, 2024,
3 Pentecost, Proper 5-B by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Genesis 3:8-15. Psalm 130. 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1. Mark 3:20-35

This past week, did you notice God's glorious sunshine bringing out the beautiful green of the leaves and grass, and the colorful flowers, and the gorgeous blue sky? Every day I was in awe of the exquisite beauty of God's magnificent creation.

And every day I was also aware of the haunting problems felt by people around us. When I went for my yearly check up with my doctor, the receptionist asked me to fill out a sheet of questions required by Medicare and to hand the sheet to the doctor. The first question was: How often have you found yourself depressed in the past few weeks: never, a few times, quite often, constantly? How often have you felt hopeless about your situation? How often have you felt insecure about your housing, about having enough food, about being able to afford your medications? After several other questions the final one was: How often have you thought about ending your life by suicide in the past few weeks?

These questions reminded me of daily fears experienced by people in our society. Many never talk about these thoughts with another person, so they are invited to talk with their doctor about these life-threatening issues.

During this week three people confided in me about their deep and haunting fears about the Presidential election this fall: one was a Republican neighbor, one was a Democrat, the other was an Independent.

And on Friday, a priest friend of ours asked us for prayers because as her husband is rapidly slipping into dementia, she is feeling overwhelmed by her anger and fear at losing her beloved companion.

All these experiences were on my heart as I read the Scriptures for today, wondering what God's Spirit might want to say to us this morning.

I was immediately struck by Paul's phrase in today's reading from 2nd Corinthians: "We do not lose heart." "We do not give up hope." He used that same phrase earlier in the chapter, so it was important to him. Paul tells us a few verses earlier about the challenges he was facing in his life: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

So, Paul experienced challenges like we are facing in our generation. He and most people of his generation were experiencing fear, violence, high taxes, an unstable world around them threatening both their physical and emotional lives. What helped Paul not lose heart, not be overwhelmed by fear and hopelessness?

Notice that Paul focuses on God's power to raise Jesus from the dead. The power and promise of Christ's resurrection gives Paul hope and confidence that no matter what happens to him or the world around him, he is confident that God will bring new resurrection life on the other side of all that

is most threatening to him and the people of his generation. So he does not lose heart. He is always full of hope.

Paul says, “Even though our outer nature (both our physical bodies and the society around us) is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (by the Spirit of Jesus working within us). “These slight momentary afflictions are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Paul didn’t focus on the problems that could tempt him to despair. Instead, he focused on God’s promise to bring about a new creation, God’s Kingdom on earth as in heaven, where God’s will is done and love reigns. Paul recognized that he might be killed, his struggling small churches might be decimated, the Roman Empire might become more violent and unjust. He also knows that these potential realities are not the last word. Paul writes: “We know that if the earthly tent (of our bodies, our church communities, our society and world) is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

If we talk this way to people around us, saying our deepest trust and confidence is in God, that what gives us hope for the future is Christ’s resurrection, not any political party or president or government or military or stock market...many of our neighbors will tell us we are crazy, just like they thought Jesus was “out of his mind” crazy in today’s gospel.

Yet, last Friday, the gospel for Morning Prayer echoed Paul’s theme of hope in the midst of what might seem like hopeless situations. Matthew 14 tells the story of Jesus learning that Herod had beheaded his cousin John the Baptist. Jesus knew that, just as the Roman government had killed John, he would also be killed by the Roman government because he taught people about God’s kingdom, whose values were contrary to the priorities of the Roman government. So, after Jesus brought hope and healing to the crowds who came seeking his help, he sent his disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a boat, while he went alone into the hills to talk with God about all the fears that were churning inside him.

Later that evening, a dangerous storm churned up the waves and threatened to capsize the disciples’ boat. When Jesus saw the storm threatening his disciples, he came to help them, walking on top of the churning waves. When the terrified disciples saw what they thought was a ghost walking toward them, Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid. It’s me, coming to help you.”

Uncertain and impetuous Peter blurted out, “If it really is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” So, Peter stepped out of the boat and amazingly, started walking to Jesus on top of the stormy water. Focusing on Jesus gave him a buoyancy on top of the powerful waves. But as soon Peter shifted his focus to look at the dangerous waves churning around him, fear gripped him again and immediately he began to sink toward death. “He cried out, Lord, save me! Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him saying, (I think with a loving smile,) “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat the wind stopped and the water was calmed. “And those in the boat worshipped Jesus saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”

This morning, both Paul and Jesus are trying to show us how to live in the life-threatening storms of our times. They teach us that what we focus our attention on makes all the difference in how we respond. If our focus is on all the potential dangers and threats that are around us, we will be paralyzed with fear and be led to despair and hopelessness. Instead, in the middle of all the raging

storms around us, we can find hope by focusing on Jesus, on God's power that raised Jesus and will raise us from the dead, on trusting God's promise to bring God's new creation on the other side of all that seems to be falling apart around us. God is at work at deeper levels than we can see or imagine. Perhaps many things in our world need to collapse and die for God to bring a new and better way of embodying God's love on the other side of the messes of our time. So, in the middle of all the frightening realities of our time, we can say with Paul, we do not lose heart, we have hope and confidence in God who can bring good out of the mess we are in.

Paul and Jesus are also clear that our hope is not for our private comfort alone. Paul and Jesus gave their lives to sharing the Good News of God's love with all the struggling people they met. God also calls us to bring Christ's healing love and hope to our fearful neighbors during this pre-election time. How can we do that? Let me offer two examples:

This week, I read a helpful sermon by Dean Randy Hollerith of the Washington National Cathedral. He wrote: "As I think about the year ahead, I ask myself, what should we be doing as faithful Christians? First and foremost, we must be clear about what is authoritative for us and what isn't. What is the authority in our lives that guides and shapes our decision and actions? Is it a party platform or a specific candidate? (The truth is, no politician can save us.) But Christ and his ways can save us, and the best thing we can do in the months to come is to lift up and double down on Christ's ways, on those values." (For example,)"Do we demonize those we disagree with? No. Instead we strive to love our enemies. Do we belittle the people who think very differently than we do? No. We treat them with compassion because they are our neighbor and so we strive to love them as we love ourselves." The Dean's wise words are not easy to practice, but would you ask God to help you practice them in the lead up to the election?

I learned a second practical way to respond to the divisions of our time from a lay friend who discovered a group called "Braver Angels." Their website says they are "leading the nation's largest cross-partisan, volunteer-led movement to bridge the partisan divide. Through community gatherings, real debates, and grassroots leaders working together, we're creating hope and showing Americans a braver way." I encourage you to look up Braver Angels online, and perhaps take one of their online courses which can teach us how to respectfully talk across differences in very practical ways.

These two examples show us that God really is at work in our troubled world in more ways than we might imagine. We don't need to lose hope. We can focus on the resurrection power of God at work in Jesus, in us and in the world around us. At times we'll all be tempted by fear and despair. But, we keep returning to focus on the hope we have in Christ and sharing that hope, that Jesus way of love with others across the divisions and amid the threatening storms of this generation.

Let us close our eyes and be still for a few moments...

What changes might Jesus invite you to make in your life this week, so you don't drown in fear, but let Jesus reach out his hand to lift you up to walk on top of the storms of our time with hope and trust in Christ's resurrection power working for good in your life and in the world around us?...

In what ways might Jesus be inviting you to reach out your hand to listen and bring Christ's compassion and hope to people around you who might be drowning in fears about our nation and world and about their personal lives?...

O Jesus, help us all to practice both receiving and sharing your compassion and hope this week, and in the weeks ahead, with the help of your Holy Spirit. Amen.