

Pentecost 4 Homily - June 16, 2024

Lord Jesus Christ;

By your grace, I will walk by faith and not by sight. Your nearness is my good. And how abundant is your goodness to those who love and trust in you.

Amen

What interesting readings we've had this morning! Yahweh taking a shoot of a cedar tree and planting it on a high hill so that it might grow into a mighty tree which can shelter all the birds of the air; Paul, beleaguered by criticism of his ministry within the early church, trying to find ways to explain that small is large and weak strong in God's kingdom; and Mark, sharing with us parables - the farmer who pays no attention to his crops once he's sown the seed and the mustard seed which needs no attention, growing into a great shrub that shelters the birds of the air in its branches.

Each of these readings so rich, they would themselves provide plenty of material for a homily. But as always, I am challenged to answer the question why are these three readings put together on this Sunday.

Is it just chance or is there perhaps a message here that is stronger when they are considered together?

Let's explore a bit and see if we can find out.

The first reading, from Ezekiel, needs a little historical perspective. It was written between the two deportations of Hebrews from Jerusalem to Babylon. Most of the population had already been deported, leaving behind only the poor. They too would soon be removed to Babylon, after rising up against the proxy ruler put in place by Babylon's king. The reading itself is an allegorical poem that promises the Hebrews that with God's help they will return to Israel.

The reading from the Second letter to the Corinthians is very different. Paul has begun to experience dissension in the church. His leadership has been brought into question and he is defending it and the faith he so dearly loves. He looks forward to a time when he will join Christ in spirit but for now he

must remain within the body and continue on his journey serving Christ as best he can, lead on his journey “by faith and not by sight.”

And then Mark 4 brings us a seemingly unconnected lesson in the form of two parables, both agricultural in nature. One is about a farmer who sows his seeds, and then seemingly ignores them, going to bed each night and arising each morning, but not weeding, not watering, in fact, having nothing to do with them until they ripen when he goes to harvest them. And what does this mean, especially when paired with another parable about the mustard seed, which grows vigorously with no help at all from human beings.

Could these two parables be about faith? Faith that God has so crafted the world that seed once planted in good soil will produce a bountiful harvest? Faith that the tiny mustard seed, falling in a crevice in the soil, can take root and grow?

Faith, that, in each case, God’s good design will set the seeds upon a journey that will result in a fruitful outcome.

So the theme that resonates with me in all these readings is one of going on a journey with trust in God’s grace, whether it be a people held in captivity, a first century Christian or a simple seed.

But what do I make of this theme? What do I share here in the pulpit?

The Hebrews journey into captivity was not smooth. It followed the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the death of many of its citizens. The richest of the remaining citizens, are marched to Babylon. Their faith must’ve been sorely tempted on that march as captives to another land.

The reading as I said is an allegory, and in it, the branch taken from the cedar is Israel. It will be taken by God to a high mountain and planted there to flourish into a great tree. This is seen as a promise to the Hebrews in Babylon that they will return to Jerusalem and flourish as a mighty kingdom. And although this prophecy must have been comforting to the Hebrews, it was not to take place quickly. Generations would pass - generations of Hebrews being born into captivity in Babylon. Still, the Hebrews in Babylon

were to keep the faith, to continue to believe in God until the day came, that they could begin the journey back home to Jerusalem.

Paul's journey was not smooth either although after that day on the road to Damascus, he never lost his trust in Jesus. So often the Paul we think of is strong and one of the most important leaders in the early Christian church, but in this passage, I think I can hear his weariness. Not weariness of preaching and evangelizing for Christ but weariness of the human dissention and divisiveness. Other members of the Christian community are attacking his ministry seeing Paul's trust in God, his constancy and willingness to suffer for Christ as weakness. Others see him as too old (he was around 50 years old) and physically frail to spread the gospel. Perhaps they are the same kind of Christians who expected Jesus when he was alive to ride into Jerusalem at the head of a victorious army. But Paul simply says that his ministry is to please God, not man and continues preaching the gospel, despite his "advancing" age and infirmities.

So it is easy to see journeys and faith in God as part of these readings but what does it mean for us? We are none of us, captive hebrews or apostles, but many of us do have journeys which can shake our faith in God. The readings don't tell us how to sustain faith in times of challenge, but I think they give us the encouragement to try to remain steadfast in our belief in God's goodness and care for us.

Early last Monday morning when I woke up and was mulling over the things that I needed to do for the day, including writing this homily, I began to think of the journey that my husband who has had Alzheimer's for the last 6 years and I am on.

Now there's that word journey – I think that might have been the connection that made me feel that this was something I wanted to talk about this morning.

People with loved ones experiencing Alzheimer's often use the word "journey" to describe the progression of their loved ones's illness and the journey that they need to walk with them.

Journey - there's almost a biblical sound to it but it's hard to see God's hand in this – does he really mean that the patient with Alzheimer's should suffer

so and that their loved ones should suffer along with them? We can't know but is there something else here? A different way to look at this?

Well, we need to start by acknowledging that Alzheimer's is a rotten disease and it's impossible to understand why anyone should have to live with it. I need to say this because I do not want to trivialize the pain that anyone feels on receiving this diagnosis or to imply there are any easy answers.

We might start by looking at the journey from the perspective of the individual with Alzheimer's. There is a time early on when they must question, what's in store for them and rebel against the thought of what will happen. But those days go by and as a disease progresses it is perhaps more difficult for them to remember who they might've once have been. Does this mean that God is gone from their minds along with so many other things?

I spend almost every other day at my husband's ward in a secure dementia unit and I see and have come to know many of the residents on that unit.

Of course when I first went there, it seemed frightening to me. It seemed that people were just shadows of themselves - many of them sitting in wheelchairs, some babbling, some with vacant stares, and none of them individuals that I could recognize. But now time has gone by and they have come into focus And now they are just people -some grouchy, some paranoid, some fun and lively – just all sorts of people.

I didn't know them before Alzheimer's, so I only know the people I meet today and they give me such joy. When I walk into the unit and across the room, over the corner is Jose and he raises a couple of fingers and greeting and gives me a huge smile and I raise my fingers in greeting and give him a huge smile. And there's Barbara who wonders if I brought her a copy of the newspaper, and Claudio, who is teaching me Italian saying "Bongiorno, Bongiorno. "

Do I make their lives happier by saying hello across the room or saying Bongiorno ? Maybe it does but I know they make my life richer.

This is a journey that is so incredibly hard. Do they take it with faith in God? I don't know. I can't ask them and they can't tell me. But God is taking that journey with them.

And what about those family members who also walk the journey with them? For them faith is incredibly important. Can you stare down a certain and frightening outcome for someone you love without faith that God is walking the path with you? I think it is faith that allows you to open your eyes to what light might shine in the darkness of this journey and to continue to love this new person your loved one has become.

And while that is the journey that I and many others have taken, you may have other journeys in your life as difficult and challenging as this journey.

This week in Wednesday morning prayer we read from Ecclesiastes chapters 8 and 9. This particular reading was difficult and confusing, but one line stood out to me. "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (9:10). I read that as a challenge to each one of us walking the journey that we have been given to walk can only do the very best we can. And in this morning's letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds us that we "walk by faith, not by sight" (5:7). When all around us seems hopeless and dark and frightening, walking by faith can help light our path.

Amen.

Rose Riley, Homilist