

Detail:

4-12-12 Easter Sunday Sermon "Love Is My Religion"

Last Sunday afternoon I found myself scrolling through internet videos, watching and listening to jazz. I watched Diana Krall play "Take the A Train;"

I watched Bob James and Earl Klugh's quartet play some jazz fusion numbers; I watched almost an hour of the great drummer Buddy Rich and his big band playing "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" and other classic pieces while being utterly amazed at his self-taught techniques; and I watched the legendary Doc Severinsen, the trumpet virtuoso known to many as the band leader on the Tonight Show during the Johnny Carson years.

Inspired by the likes of Doc Severinsen, years ago I aspired to be a jazz trumpeter like Doc, or Dizzy Gillespie or Maynard Ferguson, or even Miles Davis - but alas, when I got to college as a music major and was surrounded by other musicians with that same desire but much more talent, I realized I had neither the chops nor the dedication to the craft to reach that goal.

As a high school trumpeter though, I wasn't bad, and I did have a chance to make some money with my horn by playing "TAPS" at the funerals of veterans. The high school band director would receive a call from the local VFW or American Legion post when a vet died and then I would get a call to go to a cemetery to play. It often got me out of school, at least for a little while, and earned me a few bucks every few weeks or so.

Actually playing "TAPS" apparently has become a lost art - I've noticed at the last few veteran's funerals at which I have officiated, rather than having an actual trumpet or bugle player, there is someone

who holds a horn to their lips while it plays a recording of “TAPS.” At any kind of distance, and without a trained ear, most would never notice that that is what is happening.

Theologian David Lose recounts the story of the funeral of the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Churchill planned his own funeral, and at the end of the service a single trumpeter stood at the west end of St. Paul’s Abby, the end facing the setting sun, and played “TAPS,” the song that in the military signals dusk and the end of another day, and that is traditionally played at the end of military funerals. After a moment of stillness, Lose recounts, another trumpeter at the east end of St. Paul’s Abby, the end that faced the rising sun, then played “Reveille,” the song of the morning and the call to a new day. An ending followed by a new beginning...

In Matthew’s Gospel, when the two Marys come to the tomb on that first morning after the end of the sabbath, on that morning of a new day following so closely in the aftermath of that most horrible of days, they find - unlike in other gospel accounts - that the stone still covers the entrance to the tomb. Matthew doesn’t recount how the women intended to gain access, perhaps they were going to ask the Roman guards who were stationed there to roll it away for them, but we don’t know. No sooner do they arrive at the tomb, though, than there is an earthquake, Matthew writes. And we might remember that this gospel writer had told us that the earth also quaked in the moment that Jesus died two days before, nailed to a tree. It’s as though the earth is shaking in anticipation of what comes next, like a child waiting at the top of the steps on Christmas morning, shaking with excitement at what lies just a few steps down, at the base of another tree.

And then an angel appears and rolls the stone away. Again, as I’ve suggested before, these angels clearly don’t have the cherubic appearance that we associate with angels; their appearance uniformly

elicits fear and trembling, not unlike the trembling of the earth beneath their feet. The guards, Matthew tells us, are so frightened that they faint. And with a face like lightning and clothes white as snow, what does the angel say to the women? "Don't be afraid."

"Don't be afraid." It's what the angels ALWAYS say when they appear on the scene, "Don't be afraid." It's like they should save their voices and just have it printed on t-shirts because EVERY TIME they tell the visited to not be afraid, and EVERY TIME that person or persons is frightened to no end.

It's not working. The angel passes on the message that Jesus is not there, he has been raised and will meet them in Galilee, but they seem to struggle to receive, or at least to grasp that good news, because it then says, "With great fear and excitement" - in one translation it says fear and joy - "they hurried from the tomb to tell the disciples." But then they encounter Jesus, who, unlike in John's Gospel, they recognize, and he tells them the same thing.

Fear and joy mark our lives this Easter Sunday doesn't it? With all that's going on in the world right now, with people dying by the thousands from a virus for which we have neither vaccine nor cure, with the numbers of infected, ill, and dying growing almost exponentially, to the point of being nearly incomprehensible for us, with the economy having plummeted over the last few weeks and struggling to move out of the cellar into which it has fallen, and with not only friends and family being effected but also well-known people who we love - Tom Hanks has the virus for crying out loud - it's no wonder that fear is so prevalent right now. Of course we're afraid, why wouldn't we be afraid with all of this going on all around us, out of our control? Our world is quaking and we're just trying to hang on!

And so we arrive at Easter Sunday, THE BIG DAY in the Christian year, the day upon which our entire faith is built, and we can't meet

together as the church, to worship in our sanctuary, surrounded by loved ones and Easter lilies, “the way we have always done it.” Our uncertainty grows; our fear ramps up. Just as many of us are losing track of the days, we tend to lose track of God when we don’t get to see the places, the things, the people that remind us of our relationship to God through community. It’s hard, it’s frightening, even earth-shaking for us.

The prophet Jeremiah served God in a time such as this - it was not a pandemic, but it was a time of separation, of anxiety, of fear and loss - it was a time of exile. Everything “normal” that they knew had been taken away from them. They could not worship God in the Temple, rather than “sheltering at home,” they were actually forced from their homes and taken to a new place far away from what they knew. They were in exile. And like them, we feel like we, too, are exiled right now as well.

Fulfilling his role as a prophet, though, speaking for God, Jeremiah prophesies God’s promise that they will be built back up from the devastation they have endured. They will again feel joy and they will begin to plan for the future again.

Jeremiah says to the people of Israel,

The Lord proclaims:

The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness.

Jeremiah’s words, so immediate and inspiring to them in their time, put into our context and our time offer the same hope:

The Lord proclaims:

The people who survived the pandemic
found grace in the midst of it all.

And Jeremiah’s words continued then, as they continue now,
As you searched for a place of rest,

the Lord appeared to you from a distance:
“I have loved you with a love that lasts forever.
And so with unfailing love,
I have drawn you to myself.”
I have drawn you to myself, Jeremiah says for God.
And I will build you up
and you will be rebuilt
Again, you will play your tambourines
and dance with joy!

We will dance with joy, he promises. Because even in the midst of all that we endure right now, God goes before us, God goes with us. And while God did not bring this virus onto us, God will most certainly use it for good wherever possible, because as Jeremiah promised, God has loved us with a love that lasts forever, and with unfailing love has drawn us to God’s self.

There is no place we can go, no situation we can endure, in which God is not present with us. Love, God’s love, will keep us together. The reggae singer Ziggy Marley, son of the late great Bob Marley, has a song that speaks to this idea, titled “Love Is My Religion.” I posted a link to the song on Facebook this past week, and hopefully it is posted in the links with this message today - I encourage you to listen to it after the service today. In this song, Marley sings words that inspire my thinking as I consider how we, as the church, as followers of Jesus Christ, respond to this crisis and how we care for one another in the image of Christ.

He sings,
There's nothing that we can't cure,
And I'll keep you in my arms for sure
So don't let nobody stop us,
Free spirits have to soar

With you I share the gift,
The gift that we now know oh oh oh
Love is my religion,
Even as the Marys, having experienced drama and trauma,
devastation and death while the earth literally shook beneath their
feet, ran off in fear and excitement having experienced the Risen
Christ on that first Easter morning, we too can embrace the good
news that all is not lost, that death and disease do not have the last
word in this world or any world. A love that lasts forever, an enduring
love, an unfailing love is the promise of God - the religion of God -
fulfilled in Jesus Christ for us - regardless of the pain and struggle that
this moment in time brings.

But just as the angel's announcement of resurrection didn't eliminate
the fear of those women on that Sunday morning two thousand years
ago, the announcement of resurrection does not take away our fear
either. What it does, though, what it empowers in us and through us,
as it did for them, is to keep our faith amid our fears, to do our duty
and share the good news in spite of our anxiety. This is the very
definition of courage.

While some preachers would claim that coming to faith in Christ
should smooth all the rough places of life and still the tremors of this
world, I believe that the gospel gives us the ability to hold steady when
all around us seems to be shaking and quaking and it enables us not
just to persevere but even to flourish when life is difficult, even when it
seems that things are at their darkest, their bleakest. As David Lose
reminds us, in following "Taps" with "Reveille,"

Winston "Churchill perceived that Christ's resurrection signals above
and beyond all else that our God is a God of new life and never-
ending possibility. The good news of Christ's resurrection does not
take away our fear -- though sometimes we wish desperately that it

would -- but it does offer us courage and hope by anchoring us in the sure promise that God will have the last word, and that that word is one of light and life and grace and mercy and love and peace.”

There are, indeed, things to fear in our mortal lives. And yet the resurrection of Jesus the Christ creates the possibility for joy and hope and courage and so much more. Why? Because it changes everything. In the resurrection we see enacted God’s promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient -- real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

So on this Easter Sunday, may you live into and love into the promise of God’s last word - a word of light and life and grace and mercy and peace, but most of all, a word of unfailing love. Amen.