

*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York  
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany ~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead New York  
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*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 16B– August 22, 2021  
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Psalm 34:15-22, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN!*

Pastor Jim Wallis of “Sojourners” magazine wrote about the following spirit-filled experience of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa:

when the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s Cathedral. The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close it down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system – how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: “You maybe powerful – very powerful – but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.”

Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.”

The crowd roared, the police melted away and the people began to dance. Don’t go away, Paul says. Put on your armor and dance. I am inviting you to join the winning side.

Ortberg, John, “Roll Call,” *The Christian Century*, August 9, 2003, p.16.

My friends, we are in the midst of a battle every day, for which God has armed us. We may not be fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, but the onslaughts are noteworthy and formidable. Today we brace ourselves against the coming of Hurricane Henri, having had to change our plans yesterday for today’s worship. Members of Epiphany’s Congregational Council have been fighting the forces of

technology to try to bring you simultaneous worship in person and on zoom, after a year and a half of coping with the enemy of COVID that has kept us isolated in our homes, whenever possible. We've suffered losses: those of time with loved ones – or even the loss of their very lives, the loss of jobs, favorite activities, health. This has been a battle.

And it's not over. So God has equipped us with skills, imagination, creativity and most important – with faith to get us through.

We are on the winning side, God's side, and God invites us to suit up and join the dance of discipleship, in the face of the enemy: evil in the world. Paul tells us, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." (Ephesians 6:10.) We can be strong because God gives us the power to be so.

How do we acquire that strength? By being in relationship with Jesus who is that power and who willingly shares it with us. That's what he's offering us with his flesh and blood: an invitation to life with Jesus and God the Father.

The people for whom John wrote his Gospel were facing their world destroyed. They had been ejected from the synagogue, the central place of meaning in their lives, because they proclaimed Jesus as God the Son, crucified and resurrected. So, telling the Jesus story with a look-back of about 90 years, John "new life with him and God the Father: eternal life.

And, my sisters and brothers, that life is still offered to us. All we need to do is say "yes."

After Jesus spoke to the large crowd of disciples about eating his flesh and drinking his blood which, if taken literally, are concepts that were as offensive to his followers as they are to us, since they invoke cannibalism, many couldn't accept his teachings (John 6:60-61). They chose to go their own way (John 6:66).

And Jesus, needing to bring this difficult matter out in the open with the twelve closest disciples, asked them, "Do you also wish to go away? (6:67.)"

And "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'" (6:68-69.) Even the "hard teaching" could not turn them away. They were *compelled* by the power of God's spirit, giving them life and a relationship with Jesus, to be his followers, to proclaim his message of resurrection, acceptance, salvation and eternal life.

It's Jesus' message for us, too. While the hurricane and COVID prevent us from taking the bread and wine into our bodies today, we know that the promise of salvation, of living in love, is God's, so it is the one above all others that we may rely upon.

Even when weather events become more and more dangerous to us because of climate change. Even when a pandemic seems to be beyond control because people are afraid to accept the wisdom that God has placed in scientists' minds and the control of the lethal power of the virus that God has given us in vaccines. Even when our government has waged a war for twenty years that now seems to many people to have been lost, with tens of thousands of lives of US citizens and our allies still being threatened. Even when people are so politically divided in our country that family members have stopped speaking to each other.

It's God's promise and it's still the only one that we really can rely on. Are you offended by Jesus' words? Or will you stay with Jesus because he has the words of eternal life?

During World War II a delightful Christian English lady kept a personal diary. It tells of her husband's death in the war effort. It tells of food rationing and the horrible bombing of London . It tells of her children's evacuation to the countryside. One night during the bombings the woman confessed that she woke up and could not get back to sleep. She kept thinking of Hitler, invasion, and the S.S. troops. She trembled until she suddenly thought, "Where is Alexander the Great who gobbled up the world? Where is Caesar's dogmatic rule upheld on the tips of spears? Where is Napoleon? They are all in their graves and come to naught," she wrote. "And that is where Hitler will be, too. The same God reigns!" And she rolled over, laughed, and went back to sleep!

Crofts, Stephen M., *Sermons for Sundays after Pentecost*, CSS Publishing.

The same God still reigns. The same God still equips us to take on the monsters of the world. The same God still waits to welcome us home into his loving arms at the end of every day. Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen.