

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“The Prince of Peace”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 24, 2019

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

Luke 1:68-79

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Spirit. I pray that You would take the words that we've offered in song and in prayer that we've read from Scripture, and that You've laid upon my heart this morning, to share. Touch, bless, and transform these words so that they might become Your Word for us. The Living Word, the Word of Christ. And let that Word speak to each of us as we have need. Let it be our comfort and our strength. Let it be our mercy and our forgiveness. Let it be that which gives us the kind of peace that the world does not understand. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So for the first couple of days this last week, I was not in peace. I was in turmoil. I knew that it was the end of the Liturgical Year and that at the end of the year, we have Christ the King Sunday. I had gone to the sheets that I prepared for worship. I looked at the Gospel reading for the day, which was from Luke. But not in the first chapter. The Gospel reading today is out of the 23rd

chapter. It begins at the 33rd verse. And it reads, "When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals. One on his right and one on his left." For several days, I kept thinking, how am I going to transform the crucifixion of Jesus into a prelude for Thanksgiving and for Advent? Unlike Bill Stein, who can find preludes for any request that anybody having a wedding or a memorial service has-- he can turn what I would consider a popular, secular request into beautiful music because he finds the right one. I can't do that. I've got words like The Skull and crucifixion to deal with.

And so I literally spent a couple of days like, "Okay. How am I going to do this? I don't want to talk about that before Thanksgiving. And I don't want to set up Advent that way. I want us to have some other word. A good word. A word of hope." And I don't know what it was, but something tapped me on the shoulder on Wednesday and said, "Hey, why don't you look at your sheets again?" And I noticed, on the first sheet, it did say Luke. But it wasn't out of the 33rd chapter. It was out of the first. And I'm like, "Oh, thank God I chose Zachariah's prophecy nine months ago," because that I can work with. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel. He has looked with favor on his people and redeemed them. Hallelujah. Amen. No skull, no crucifixion, good news. I was feeling better. Sat with that for a bit and thought, "Okay, this is wonderful." Thought about stories and situations that might work in the sermon. And as is my practice, I then turned to the commentaries. And in one of the commentaries, it said that at the first verse, verse 68, and in the last verse of the passage, 78, there's the same word in Greek that is translated two different ways. In the first verse, it's translated, "Looked favorably on." And in the last verse, it says, "Will break upon us." But the Greek word-- and I don't know why they didn't choose this translation. The Greek word actually means to visit, to show concern, to care for, and to help. Try this. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited with care and concern his people and redeemed them. Now I don't know about you, but that seems like it preludes Thanksgiving and especially Advent and Christmas a whole lot better. The idea that God had visited the people, and did so out of care and concern, and to offer help, assistance, and comfort. This will preach, I thought to myself. And so I started to wonder, what will it look like, or what does it look like if we make visits with the mindset of having that visit be healing for the person that we're with? Or that we might show compassion in all that we do? Or, as the passage says later, about bringing light to those who sit in dark places and in the shadow of death, how might we understand our visits to bring light or lightness to those that are struggling? How might we walk, talk, and be the way of peace for someone else?

All of these questions were rolling around inside of me, and then I remembered something that happened when I was in seminary. My first field assignment was to the oncology floor at the local hospital. Because of kids and study schedule, I would make visits late at night, and to be honest, I was terrified. I came to seminary from an evangelical background. I knew a lot about being saved by the Blood of Christ. I didn't know anything about sitting with someone who was dying. I was so stressed out that I went to see my field professor, the Reverend Harry, before I even went and I said, "Harry, I can't do this one. Give me something else." He's like, "What do you mean you can't do it? You can't make a hospital visit? Don't you know that in ministry you're going to have to make a lot of hospital visits?" I'm like, "Yeah, but I just don't want to do this. I don't know what to say." And he said, "Don't worry. All's you need to do is show up. Just show up. You don't say anything. Let the patient say something, and then you talk, but make sure at the end you say a prayer, and you say, 'God bless you.'" I'm like, "Okay, so I can show up, don't say anything, say a prayer, say, 'God bless you,' that's it." He's like, "Yeah, just try it." I'm like, "All right." So off I go. It's late one night. I go into the room. I grab the chair at the foot of the bed. I slide it next to the man who was dying from cancer. I sat there for awhile. I don't know how long--10 seconds, 10 hours, it all felt the same. All's I knew is that if I talked too soon, something would come out of my mouth, and it wouldn't be words. I was so nervous. I sat there. I grabbed his hand through the rail of the bed. I held it. He squeezed it. I squeezed. We sat there, and finally he turns his head on the pillow, looks at me, and says, "Aren't you going to say anything [laughter]?" And I said, "No, because my field professor told me just to be here until you say something." And he said, "Well, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard [laughter]." But it worked. I just sat there. He talked, I responded, and the visit went fine. At the end, I offered a prayer. I said, "God bless you." And as I stood up, I leaned over the rail, kissed him on the forehead, and walked out the door, never to see him again.

Just show up, be present. You don't have to worry about the words. In a sense, as I look back on that visit, I realized that it had all of the characteristics of what our passage is talking about today. A caring visit with compassion, offering help or assistance, presence, hope, peace, it's all there. And it's almost automatic if we can just be there, not be anxious, and breathe. As I was holding this invitation to just be present, to trust that the Spirit will make conversation happen, and that it'll be okay, I ran into an article, and it was actually early this morning, and it talked about Fred Rogers or as he's more formally known, the Reverend Fred Rogers, ordained Presbyterian minister in the Presbytery of Pittsburgh. He was ordained into a ministry as a televangelist to children, offering grace to the world. And for 33 years, he filmed his show and offered the amazing messages that we have come to know about him. Won't you be my neighbor? That's his catchphrase. The article was talking about the theological imprint or impact that he sort of embodied in the show. And it listed a couple of things that go along with this idea of just show

up, trust that the Spirit will do Its work, offer a prayer and a blessing, and be done. The first thing that it said is that every time, before a taping, Fred Rogers would pray the same prayer. Let some word that is heard be Thine. The way that he came up with this understanding was not from the seminary, but was from experience. He and a friend went to hear a famous preacher. When they got to the venue, they found out that the preacher was sick and a substitute was there. The person preached. Fred Rogers thought it was one of the worst sermons he had ever heard, and he was extremely disappointed. He wanted to hear the famous preacher. The person he went with heard the Word of God for them that night. And on the way back from wherever that place was to dropping off the friend, Fred Rogers heard how God had used that worst sermon ever to speak truth to his friend. And in that moment, he realized that sometimes words that come out of your mouth are holy. And it's not up to you to decide when that is. It's up to the hearer. This also leads to the second theological understanding that Mr. Rogers had, which was that the space between the person who's watching the television and the television set is holy ground. He trusted that somewhere between the message and the receiver, God's Spirit was at work. Again, he saw that with his friend, in a message that he didn't like. The space between people is holy ground and that the Spirit can work in that space if we let the Spirit work.

And then the last thing, which is maybe what he's most famous for is, everyone is loved just as they are. Without regard to color, creed, orientation, status, anything, he conveyed the message to everyone and especially to children that they are loved just as they are. A red sweater, white tennis shoes, a folksy style, but in the end, he honored what we felt was most important. And in a way, he demonstrated or embodied a true belief in the work of the Spirit. And to me, the idea of reading this passage and thinking about that in this season, on this Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, and as we prepare for Thanksgiving, and as we look forward to Advent and Christmas, the idea of visiting, and visiting not just to catch up or to tell stories or to gossip, but to visit with compassion and concern and the offer of help and peace, that's a powerful thing. And I hope we don't miss that. I hope that in the busyness, we don't lose that sense of the Spirit being at work between us.

As preachers, we trust the Spirit's at work. I know that I've had more than-- I don't even know how often. Someone will say, "Oh, you spoke to me today." And when I asked, "Well, what did I say?" And it's like, "What? That didn't come out of my mouth." But that's what they heard. The Spirit spoke. And what I've been thinking about is the Thanksgiving table and the Christmas parties and all those things, and how would those moments be if we paid attention to the space, the holy space that we have between ourselves and those we're with? Something tells me, at the end of those events, we'll have the same reaction as the man who I sat with in the hospital in Princeton. He simply said, "Thank you". Amen.