

5 Pentecost, Proper 7, Yr. C
June 19, 2016
Isaiah 65:1-9; Luke 8:26-39

The passages from Isaiah and from Luke's gospel are two very challenging readings. Or perhaps they seem so because they speak directly to our time, which is also extremely challenging.

I'd like to begin by telling you about the initial interview I had with the search committee, now almost 13 years ago. One of the questions I was asked was whether I preached politics from the pulpit. Having come from Texas where many ministers felt free not only to preach politics, but to preach partisan politics and even to tell congregants how to vote, I was pretty confident when I replied that I didn't preach politics – that I was called to preach the Gospel and that was political enough. I still hold that position – that the values set forth in the Gospel, those values of love, compassion, tolerance, justice – are not just abstract theological stuff, stories that we find interesting, perhaps, but they are meant to challenge us to live them out, not only in our private lives, but in our common lives as well. Those values, whether articulated in the OT or the NT are there for us - to guide our conduct and to provide a measure against which we can assess our private and our communal lives. The question for this morning, in the light of last Sunday's shooting and in the light of the rhetoric of our political campaign and the paralysis and division in our political system, is HOW ARE WE DOING IN GOD'S EYES?

It's a tough question. In the Isaiah reading, the Israelites who were exiled in Babylon have come back to Israel. When they got there, they discovered that everything was still in ruins: the temple was gone, the land was deserted, and they thought that God was silent. But rather than looking to what they had done to cause all this, they accused God instead. Just before our reading, there's a passage in which they basically say that it's God's fault – **you** made us stray, they say; **you** hardened our hearts. What we hear is God's reply. No, God says, I'm here. I was ready to be sought out, ready to be found. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good. It wasn't my indifference to you, God says, but rather your rebellion that caused the nation to fall. The only way back to peace and security is to get back on track. To live lives of justice, compassion and worship.

You know that Israel saw itself as the chosen nation. But they forgot that to be chosen was not to be in line for special treatment or some kind of special protection. Instead, to be chosen was to have been given a special responsibility. Christians have taken that mantle of chosen-ness upon themselves, but, like the Israelites, we too can forget what that really means. We often hear that America is chosen, is blessed. It goes all the way back to the beginning when the idea was that America would be a city on the hill, an example for the world. But, again, we have to be careful to understand what that means: NOT that God is somehow cushioning us from the consequences of our decisions, NOT that no suffering will come upon us because we're special, but that we have been chosen to walk and live in a way that shows God's truth, God's justice, God's love, God's compassion to all the world.

The section from Luke's gospel is equally challenging. Jesus is out of familiar territory; he's in a Gentile area. The presence of pigs along is enough to alert us to that even if we're unfamiliar

with the geography. He and his disciples had been caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee and had been blown to these shores. Jesus is surrounded by what the Jews would have found unclean: the location is unclean because the man is living in a graveyard; the man is unclean; he's inhabited by an unclean spirit and then, on top of it all, pigs are present. Jesus heals the man, and negotiates with the spirits who ask to be allowed to enter the pigs (there's probably a whole sermon there). But then, to my mind, there's the most interesting part of the Gospel. And that's the reaction of the people. The text says that they came out and saw the man, now in his right mind and, instead of seeing the miracle that had occurred and rejoicing, it says that they "asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear." Now, what's that about, do you suppose? Great fear. Why? Were they afraid that if Jesus kept sending pigs over cliffs, their economy would fall apart? Or was it that they were afraid of that kind of power; a power that upset the status quo? A power that, as the opponents of the early Christians used to say, WAS TURNING EVERYTHING UPSIDE DOWN?

So, then fear. We know about fear. It's all around us these days. It's pervasive. It's threatening to take over our politics and our very lives. Someone has said that when we indulge in fear, there's a risk that we will not only be paralyzed by our fears and unable to overcome them, but that we will be dependent on the means we find to control and contain them. We can look back at history to see how fear takes over and reason goes out the window. Look at Europe and the Nazis who were able, because of fear, to demonize a whole people and to wreak destruction on vast parts of the world. Closer to home, look at the fear of the white South after the slaves were freed. Their fear that the blacks would get power and take vengeance resulted in Jim Crow laws whose impact is still felt today. Or look at the internment of Japanese citizens during WWII – later recognized as a horrendous injustice, but fear-driven policy at the time. Or look at that blot on Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, who was able to manipulate fears about communism, destroying people's lives until he was finally stopped. Interestingly enough, one of those instrumental in ending that reign of terror was Edward R. Murrow who said, "..."(McCarthy's) primary achievement has been in confusing the public mind, as between the internal and external threats of Communism....We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men..."

So what do we do about this? About our very human tendency to fall victim to fear? I think perhaps the first thing is to recognize the corrosive effect of fear. And then, perhaps to ask ourselves what exactly it is that we most fear? Certainly there are what I suppose we could call temporal fears: fears around health and well-being for ourselves and our loved ones. But, as Christians, as believers, we are called to be sustained by our knowledge that we live on a different plane. That we are freed from fear because, in Paul's words,

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8)

In other words, in the way that matters the most, we are already totally and completely safe. And that knowledge, the knowledge that we are safe in the hands of God, means that we can be

free from all those fears. We're free to imagine what God desires for the world, perhaps as best written about by Isaiah – that world were the wolf and lamb lie down together, where swords are beaten into plow-shares and spears into pruning hooks. Free to imagine that and then called to live in a way that makes that kind of world a reality.

I was thinking about that when I was writing that sermon. What if, with God's desired kingdom as our goal, with our call to live out those kingdom virtues of justice, compassion, truth and love, what if, with that in mind, we went back to the somewhat simplistic idea somewhat akin to What Would Jesus Do and asked ourselves how we would respond if Jesus showed up in town, or how we would be living if Jesus were standing right alongside of us? What would our conversations be like if Jesus was standing there listening? Or our decisions about how to spend our time? Or our money? Or how we treated our fellows? When I was thinking of this, I was reminded of growing up as a Roman Catholic and having the nuns say something to the effect that Jesus was watching and listening all the time. And that put me in mind of the story that in a food line, there was a sign by the apples saying, "Take only one, Jesus is watching" and then at the end of the line another sign, this one by the cookies. which said, "Take all you want, Jesus is watching the apples." Because the truth is, of course, that Jesus IS present; that's the truth of the resurrection. He's present in every time and place.

There's another truth and that is that we ARE chosen. God has placed us in the world to do the work of life, not death. God is asking us to do what God desires of us despite our fears or our doubts. Let me close with a final story. This is a true one (unlike the cookies/apples one) and it's about one of my seminary professors, who was a Jesuit priest. He was sent to be a missionary to Japan and, while there, he met a young German scholar and they fell in love. The question was: should he leave the priesthood to marry her? He told me that, in trying to decide what to do, his spiritual advisor told him to imagine himself before God at the moment of his death, when he would be asked to give an account of his life. "Once you know what you will say about your life, you'll know what to do," was the advice. In that case, he decided to marry. But the point of the story is that each of us will one day be asked to account for everything we've been entrusted with – all the years we've been given, the insights, the talents, the treasure. We know what God desires of us, faith and hope have given us the vision to live into; God's constant presence will give us the courage. Amen.