

19 Pentecost, Proper 23

October 11, 2020

Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

I remember being at a clergy conference where the bishop asked the question: how do you decide what you are going to preach on? Good question, isn't it? Sometimes it's what strikes you in the readings, sometimes it's what's going on in the world at the time, sometimes there's an encounter or something you read that resonates with one or more of the readings, sometimes there's a common theme that can't be resisted. As you can tell, constructing a sermon is not an exact science!

This week, it's a bit of all of the above. Three things caught my attention: Paul's telling the Philippians not to worry about anything, and then telling them about the peace of God which passes understanding. Both of those point to the question of where we find our security. And those same themes are present in the Isaiah reading. So, anxiety, worry, the peace of God, security. And then, finally, how can we live if we really KNOW that we are secure – finally and ultimately secure.

Fairly recently I read a couple of books about our age. One was titled *The Age of Anger*, one was *The Age of Anxiety*. You know that I think highly of Peter Gomes, who was the chaplain at Harvard for many years. He tells of preaching at a commencement ceremony and using that text that says we should not be anxious about anything, look at the lilies of the field, and so on. He said that afterwards a father came up to him and said that that was utter nonsense. His daughter was graduating from a prestigious high school and we went on to say that it was anxiety that got her into that school, anxiety that would get her into Harvard and anxiety that would get her the job in the law firm of her choice. One could argue that that's not what Jesus meant and that it wasn't so much anxiety that got his daughter all those things, but planning and hard work. In any event, Gomes went on to say that he couldn't think of any appropriate response to the father, so he just said, "God bless you," and walked away. But that word, BLESS, or blessed, is actually a response to anxiety. Most of you are familiar with the General Thanksgiving in the BCP in which we thank God for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life. Peace and security are found

in the recognition that we are already blessed, even in the midst of turmoil and the bedlam of these times.

I remember being at St. Paul's in London and hearing the choir there, which was a blessed experience in itself. I later bought a CD of that choir. One of the hymns was "HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING." It's not in our hymnal, although it should be. If you know it, you'll recognize the words:

My life goes on in endless song  
Above Earth's lamentations  
I hear the real though far off Hymn  
That hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife  
I hear its music ringing  
It sounds an echo in my soul  
How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that rock I'm clinging  
Since Christ is Lord of Heaven and Earth  
How can I keep from singing?

I wish you were all here with me and that Sue Raye was playing so that we could all lift our voices in that song. Because it's all there, really. Trouble, tumult and yet the security that comes from knowing that Christ is Lord of it all. And that kind of security allows us to sing – even more, we can't help but sing for the joy of it all. Here's Paul again - REJOICE is what he tells us.

Security, life without worry, the peace that passes understanding. We know that that kind of peace, shalom, is not just the absence of conflict, but it's a positive condition in which everyone and everything is flourishing. It's about wholeness, and justice and the kind of righteousness that tends to relationships.

We read about it in the Psalm. We find security in the fact that the Lord is our shepherd, caring for us, present to us, even in those dark valleys. It's an unconditional belief that God is trustworthy. That belief doesn't mean there won't be trials, but it does mean you won't be overcome.

Or look at the Isaiah reading. Isaiah saw the Northern Kingdom overrun by the Assyrians. But his vision transcended temporal security for Israel. What he saw was hope for a new heaven and a new earth. He saw this God bringing justice, sheltering the poor and those in need, silencing, he says, the song of the ruthless. It's worth noting the repetitive use of the word ALL. Four times in six lines. All peoples will feast together and even more powerfully, God will remove the shroud of death, the fear of death that is spread over ALL peoples and will wipe away the tears from ALL faces. What can you say to that except, YES! It's been said that this is just lofty poetry. Maybe, but it sets out our highest and best hopes, it sets out a vision. It may be aspirational and it certainly is that we are still struggling to achieve that kind of peaceable kingdom, but we honor that vision in our struggle, the vision draws us onward. We can make a fruitful comparison here with the Declaration of Independence. That language, too, is aspirational, setting out the vision for who we can be as a people. And through our history, that vision has meant positive change: look at Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. who reminded us of that vision and enabled us to move toward its realization.

Isaiah saw that new heaven and new earth. So did Paul. That vision both enables us to find our security in trusting a loving God and it also frees us to live the kind of lives that will make that vision a reality. Because peace and security are found both in our trust in God and also in the kind of community we construct because of that peace and security – the shorthand word for that is the Kingdom of God.

You'll remember when I began I mentioned that sometimes the direction of a sermon is set by what I've been reading. That's the case today. I recently finished Rabbi Sack's new book, *Morality*. His central theme is that we have been derailed by our extreme individualism and that we need to recover the WE that respects the common good and that recognizes that we have responsibilities toward one another. We have, he says, too much I and not enough WE. We can't construct the kingdom alone; we need each other. That's what Paul is talking about when he lists those essential virtues at the end of his letter. Live a certain kind of life, he says. **WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS HONORABLE, WHATEVER IS JUST, PURE, COMMENDABLE.** By living that way, we will help to make God's vision a reality.

I would like to share two stories from Sacks' book.

The first is something that occurred on his honeymoon. He and his wife had gone to the Italian coast. Any even though the sea seemed totally inviting, since he had never learned to swim, he stayed on the shore. But watching people out farther, he saw that they could go a long way and the water was still only up to their knees, so he decided to try it. He said he was in water that seemed shallow and suddenly he found himself totally out of his depth. He tried to swim, but failed, and kept going under. People were too far away to call for help. When he went under for the fifth time, he was sure it was the end. He first panicked and then reconciled himself to the fact that he was going to die and then, suddenly, someone who had seen him thrashing about, swam over, took hold of him, brought him to the shore and deposited him, almost unconscious, at the feet of his wife. He uses that as a metaphor for life. We need help, we put out a hand, someone takes it and lifts us to safety. True security is found in loving relationship and in community.

In that same vein, he tells the story of the small town of Gander on the island of Newfoundland. Quiet, remote, removed. Until 9/11 when the US closed its airspace to incoming planes. 38 planes, carrying almost 7000 passengers were forced to land at Gander's airport. The people of the town greeted them with a feast they had prepared. Local bus drivers, who had been on strike, came back to work to take the newcomers to various shelters around town. People invited them into their homes so they could shower. Local fast food outlets brought pizza and chicken and sandwiches. Children were given toys. The phone company set up a bank of phones so people could contact their families. One person wrote: For the better part of a week, nearly every man, woman and child in Gander stopped what they were doing so they could help. They placed their lives on hold for a group of strangers and asked for nothing in return. They affirmed the basic goodness of humanity at a time when it was easy to doubt such humanity still existed.

These kinds of things are happening all around us. Simple goodness, response to need, recognition of our connection to one another. All of these remind us of the promise and the reality of the kingdom, the shroud

of death removed, and tears wiped away. When we see and hear these things, how can we keep from singing?