

Sermon – Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6

Matthew 9:35 – 10:23 – The sending of the 12 apostles

The present time is a time like no other. It has the characteristics of the Great Depression and the Civil Rights era and the Great Recession all rolled up into one world-wide upheaval. And here in the United States we need to overlay a presidential election that is sure to be nasty and dispiriting.

In any one of those past crisis people have been left feeling unmoored, feeling that all they held as foundational in life has disintegrated. People are left searching for answers, searching for the meaning of life and searching for a way out of their suffering. No one likes to suffer. Many people today are suffering from trauma, grief, loss of employment and health insurance, fear of lost government support, fear of COVID-19, and fear of loss of life and opportunity, especially for young recently graduated college kids.

In past times of crisis the church has stood with wide open doors to welcome in those who seek grounding in their faith or solace in the peace of prayer in God's house of prayer. Today we can't even offer that degree of comfort for our communities because we are shutdown, and even if we can open we can become super spreader sites if we don't take abundant measures to protect all who come across the threshold.

We each experience these times in different ways dependent on personal circumstance, faith and family structure. Collectively though we are walking the path through the valley of the shadow of death seeking God's rod and staff to comfort us. As we walk many will join in the pilgrimage to whatever lies beyond the horizon up ahead.

We might say that we are in this together but we well know that even though we are all living through this time, we have experienced the impacts differently. This has been born out especially in the statistics around the high death rate amongst people of color, not just in this country but in many other countries. People of color have been adversely impacted in life by the systemic racism that exists within our government, community institutions and corporate work places. The blatant killing of George Floyd, and many other black and brown people, has galvanized the community to say racism in all of its forms must end.

In times like these our feelings become heightened. Many, many people are angry at police brutality, and rightly so. Misuse of power given by a community to its law enforcement people is a betrayal of trust that leads to more and more violence. Many people however also find their voice during times like this. Many people rediscover their faith and want to reconnect with their God. People's life journeys deviate in many unexpected ways.

When you reflect on how you are reacting to this time you might experience a sense of wonderment at God's work in your life. What is God calling you to do and to be for others at this time? For all of us that follow Jesus, as his disciples we must continually surrender our lives so that God's plan for us can be enacted. Surrendering ourselves to God is what we refer to as dying to new life. For many people this pivot point in life arrives with a major life event like these

current crises or during a search for answers to existential questions. What is the purpose of my life ? For others, it may be a more gradual recognition that life is changing. For all of us it is a journey into a deeper and deeper relationship with God.

Scripture is full of stories of people who have made this journey toward surrender. One of the earliest is the story of Abraham, called by God to be the father of many nations, and his wife Sarah. They were an old aged couple with no children, possibly something that pained them. When I read this passage I always chuckle at Sarah's reaction to God's promise of a child for her, and especially when she is caught out laughing at the prospect. Laughter is such a part of disbelief, and denial of this response, such a human reaction to a sudden realization that it may indeed be possible.

Wonder and skepticism filled Sarah. When she heard the promise, she had a moment that was like, "yeah right!" It was almost too crazy a proposition that someone close to 100 years old could possibly conceive a child. But the Lord, here represented by three men – the first example of the trinity, says to Abraham "is anything too wonderful for the Lord." All things are indeed possible for God.

We might also have had a similar reaction if someone told us our future, a future that seemed so preposterous against our current circumstances. We can never say never on our faith journeys. If someone had told us in early January this year that we would within 6 weeks close the church, isolate at home for 10-12 weeks, experience the deaths of many loved ones including many work colleagues, suffer massive unemployment of 20% of the labor force, a 30% decline in the stock market, the closing of international and state borders, and the grounding of 95% of the airline industry and then experience a civil rights protest movement resurgence we would all, I'm sure have scoffed that it would be impossible for all that to happen in such a short time.

Yet here we are walking a journey through exactly all of those societal impacts. What is God calling us to do and be in the midst of this time? Abraham and Sarah walked forward in faith into an unknown future far from their homes. But they trusted God and gave thanks to God at every stop along the way. We might have chuckled like Sarah if angels had of told us about the coming crisis and promised us something we thought absolutely impossible. God is always working something out in the midst of all this and God needs us to be faithful and walk forward looking beyond the horizons we can see.

The apostle Paul might have also laughed if someone had told him how his life was to be transformed. Rather being the pious and strict Jew that he was, someone who persecuted those that didn't follow the Law, he would become a follower of the very man that he sought to persecute and become one of the most influential followers of Jesus Christ that has existed. I am sure he would have laughed and been very dismissive. Paul's story of transformation is one of the most powerful stories in scripture.

Paul argues that through faith in Jesus we have peace with God and because of this peace we are filled with the grace of God. God's grace and our faith allows us to hope in a future where we can share this grace and peace with others. The journey he acknowledges will be tough. Paul suffered immensely during his new life as he sought to first make sense of what God was calling

him to be and then in his efforts to witness to the new communities of faith and grow the church. He was regularly imprisoned and flogged and he worked hard making tents to support himself. His missionary work often brought him to tears.

Suffering is to be a part of our faith journeys as Paul himself testifies. He explains in the verses from Romans Chapter 5 that we heard this morning that in suffering we learn perseverance and endurance because we are powered by trusting God and the sure hope of salvation. We certainly need to hear this assurance again and again.

Through endurance we will grow and flourish as people, developing a character of hopefulness that all things are indeed possible with God. If God can bless Sarah with a child at her advanced age, and if God can open our countries eyes to systemic racism and a failed government, and if God can call me out of my old life in Sydney and set me to work here, anything is indeed possible.

It is necessary to understand that suffering is an important aspect of our lives as humans. It is a natural balance to pleasure. Without one we would not understand the bounds of the other. Trusting that we can endure suffering is character building if approached from the right state of being. There is a transformational aspect to suffering that isn't found in pleasure. Sometimes it is hard to discern what happens to us when we are suffering but often on reflection we can see how we were sustained and how we might have grown as a result.

The gospel message this morning ties into this theme. Jesus commissions his twelve apostles to go out into the world to heal people's bodies and souls. In sending the apostles out Jesus didn't equip them with backpacks full of life's necessities. Jesus sent them out with nothing other than their strong faith that their needs would be met by the people and communities to which they would go. These fisherman and tax collectors probably had comfortable lives before this, yet here they were being commissioned to give up those lives for the sake of Jesus' love for the world.

Jesus acknowledged that he was sending them out as lambs amongst wolves. They were offered a promise that they would not be alone in their travels and that in their faith the Holy Spirit would guide them and would guide their words when they got into trouble. There is a sense of comfort in that promise that we can draw on today as well.

Endurance in our Christian journeys will be rewarded with a deeper sense of God's presence that manifests as a trust that anything is possible. Our lives will become full as we journey deeper and deeper into our relationship with God, his son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We stand open to receive God's grace, freely given to us, and we hold onto the promise of God through all the ups and downs of our lives. As the going gets tough we can surrender further into God's presence. In the depth of that relationship we will be filled with wonderment and awe.

Jesus calls on all of us to witness for him amongst our families and friends by being true disciples. Jesus sent the apostles out amongst their own brothers and sisters, not amongst the outsiders, the Samaritans and the Gentiles. Jesus sends us out anew this day to give witness to him and his message of love, hope and perseverance. Trust that in giving witness the Holy Spirit

will give all of us the words to say and the actions to take. All we need to do is to be open to receiving God's grace which is of course freely given.

Amen