

2 Lent B 2018

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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
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Grace, mercy and peace to you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

One of my favorite scriptures is from Isaiah 55: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, says the Lord.” God’s ways are different from ours; God’s thoughts are different from ours. For instance, how long it has taken for St. Matthew’s to get to the point of calling a new pastor – it is obvious that God’s thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways. Today’s scriptures prove that, too.

First, a little background for the reading from Genesis. In chapter 12, God says to Abram, “Go where I tell you to go, and I will make of you a great nation.” So Abram goes. Wherever God says to go. Abram obeys. Good job, Abram! But after a little while, Abram notices that God still has not made of him a great nation. It’s just Abram and Sarai, and sometimes his nephew, Lot. The Lord repeated the promise to Abram twice more before Abram complained to God about how God still hadn’t kept that promise. Then Abram had a child with Hagar, Sarai’s slave. Which turned out to be an awkward situation. [ahem] And then we have today’s reading, where the Lord gives Abram a new name – Abraham – and Sarai a new name – Sarah – and then the Lord declares a new covenant, a new promise: “you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” Abraham has to wait; but eventually God gives Abraham not just what God had promised at first – but more. Not just father of a great nation – but father of a multitude of nations! We can number those great nations today, by the three great world religions that claim Abraham as father: Judaism, Christianity, Islam. And God did all that when Abraham was 99 years old! Way past the age when fatherhood seemed at all likely. Or even desirable. But God acts. In ways that are not our ways. And God acts -- finally! [look at watch] In times that are not our times.

Even stranger are the thoughts that God reveals in the gospel for today. Jesus predicts his own suffering and death. And resurrection, too, although the crowd gathered doesn’t seem to hear that – they are so distressed by the thought of Jesus suffering and dying. Then Peter, the self-appointed leader of the disciples, took that as his cue to disagree with Jesus. Notice how delicately Peter handled it – he took Jesus aside. He was not going to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowd, or even in front of the other disciples. But Jesus is not embarrassed. Jesus is not delicate on the subject of his suffering and death. God’s way **will** be suffering and death. So Jesus rebukes Peter in front of the other disciples. “Get behind me, Satan!” For all Peter’s thoughtfulness, he gets called Satan – the accuser. And then Jesus says, in an echo of Isaiah 55, “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Ok. God’s way is suffering and death. But I ask the human question, Why, God, why, Jesus, must God’s Son suffer and die? And, frankly, why must we who want to become followers of Jesus, deny ourselves, and take up our crosses, and follow him? That is a lot to ask. That is a lot to expect. I would rather NOT deny myself. I certainly do not want to take up a cross. And if that is where Jesus is going, I might just look in another direction. Can’t the truth of God’s love be found somewhere else? Like, in a really comfortable place? A land of milk and honey? Burying my head in the sand. No problems. Hakuna matata. [fingers in ears, eyes closed, “blahblahblah.”] I prefer denial to self-denial.

The wisdom of God does not go there. The wisdom of God, the ways of God, the thoughts of God, go to places we don’t want to go. Self-denial. Sacrifice. Suffering. The cross.

So what good news can we get out of this strange teaching, this strange commandment from our Lord? Just this: that wherever we don’t want to go, Jesus has been there. Whatever we don’t want to do, Jesus has already done it. Suffering, for what seems like no good earthly reason? Jesus has done it. Jesus suffered.

Jesus was looked down on. Jesus was contradicted, by a very close follower. Jesus was admonished by family members. Jesus was betrayed – in lots of ways, and not only by Judas. Jesus was abandoned. Jesus was hungry. Jesus was bereft. Jesus felt his body fail him. He has been to all the tragic places we never want to go. He has made a place for us there. With him.

The place Jesus has made for us is a place of suffering, a place where good news can be shared. That is what church is supposed to be. A place for sinners to hear good news. A place for broken people to come for healing. Where we can say “I am broken. But I have hope in my God.” The most recent example of suffering leading to good news comes not from a church, but from a high school. Jesus was there with high schoolers from Parkland, Florida, in their classrooms and school hallways as bullets flew; now they are carrying the cross of their experiences. They have been in a place of suffering and death. They have come out of it to share the real truth of their pain and brokenness. The pain and brokenness that afflicts the United States far worse than any other country on this planet. These teenagers have witnessed that the thoughts and ways of the citizens and government officials of our nation have caused harm to them and to many others. Even after they have received death threats for speaking out, they still call on us who are adults to change our thoughts and our ways to become more like God’s thoughts and ways. I feel chastened by their words, their witness. From Psalm 51, the great penitential psalm used on Ash Wednesday, “the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.” I have that troubled spirit. I have that broken heart. The children, the youth, are leading us, allowing us to glimpse in the place of suffering and death, that God desires us to choose life. To choose God’s ways.

When we go to an uncomfortable place, to share real truth, the real truth of pain and brokenness – but with the hope that the grace of God will come out of it – that is taking up a cross. Not what we want. Only Your will be done, O Lord. Your will. Amen