

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
November 17, 2024

Message by The Rev. Michael Burke
Liturgical Year B, Proper 28

(image of bar graph with rising numbers)

*Calls to crisis and suicide prevention lines
have increased 700% in the days
after the recent Presidential election*

Well, its been two weeks since the election. Some of our initial reactions to events have begun to settle down, (or ramp up -either way!) and we have had a dozen or so days to reflect on the national results.

And it's time to begin talking about that.

At any point, you are free to get up and leave, but I hope you won't do that.

To those who might decry any mention of politics from the pulpit, I remind you that Jesus was crucified by the forces of an Imperial occupying power, in cahoots with the religious system they had dominated and co-opted. The very existence of the Holy Gospel is political, and the psychological and sociological insights of the past sixty years have taught us that the personal is *always* political, and nothing is more personal to us than our faith.

Even so, I'm going to begin in what is, for some, a perhaps uncomfortable and unexpected place.

I want to begin by talking directly to those whose Presidential candidate *won* in the election. To those who voted for, and supported, the President-elect. Now, it's fair to say I know that I'm not exactly talking to the majority of the room here, but nonetheless...

You are loved. (Other folks, settle down. - we'll get to you in a minute.)

You are loved.

When you come in the main entrance here at St. Mary's, you might have seen a sign:

And on that sign is a long list of all kinds of descriptors of identity: young old, male, female, gay, straight, cis, trans... skeptic, believer, questioning...

You. Are. Loved.

You are loved because you are made in the image of loving God. And nothing you can do, or fail to do, can change that image of God in you. True, our awareness of it can be dimmed or diminished. Our view

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of one another or of ourselves can be obscured or distorted. But there is nothing you can do, or fail to do to *erase* that imprint within.

And the same welcome that applies to all the rest of us: (young old, male, female, gay, straight, cis, trans... skeptic, believer, questioning) applies to you.

You are loved. And welcome. Because God welcomes you. And this is God's table. It is not ours.

That's how this faith thing works.

Now, others among us, I dare say, *we* do not fully understand how you see things nor the choices you might have made. But hang in there with us. Help us to see what you see. Don't hide or closet those parts of yourself, but help us to understand. Be fully yourselves here. Because, I pray, we all will be fully ourselves as well.

(pause). Let's move on. To the rest of you, and I don't want to make it sound like there are only two types or groups of people here, so.. *all* the rest of us...

Pay attention to what you are feeling right now. Because my words may have provoked a strong emotional reaction. That too is OK. Stay with that feeling for a bit.

It's been two weeks full of strong feelings, hasn't it? The election unleashed a flood of fears for so many. November 6th and 7th (the two days after the election) were 15 hour days here at church – the texts, the phone calls, and e-mails just kept coming in, wave after wave, both from members of St. Mary's but also from the wider community. It is in times like these, that I come to understand anew how much St. Mary's serves as chaplain to our city of Anchorage – folks who aren't members here, folks who aren't Episcopalian, folks who aren't Christians, but turn to this place on the hill for a word for strength, comfort, understanding, or direction.

That is part of the work and mission and ministry that we all are a part of.

We have folks worried about the validity of their marriages, in a post-gay-marriage world. We have members who are trans who are concerned they may no longer be able to access gender-affirming care. We have women, and young women in particular, and people with pre-existing health conditions fearful of losing access to health care choices. We have folks with family and loved ones who are dreamers, or are undocumented. I'll stop, because it is not my intent to ramp up anyone's anxiety any higher than it already is.

It is already pretty high.

In fact, that is where we *begin* our work. In full-on anxiety mode.

There was once an ancient genre of literature, largely extinct today. It's last real writings were in the Middle Ages in Europe. It developed some 500 years before the time of Jesus, in the unsettled world of

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the Israelites who had returned from Babylon. Scholars call it apocalyptic literature, most fully developed in the Book of Daniel, from which a portion of our First Reading originated this morning.

Apocalyptic literature in the Bible often arises when the expectations of a previous age fail to come to pass. In the time after Israel's Exile in Babylon, there were those who had believed that the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that after seventy years in exile, a new messianic kingdom would be established. In 539 BC, Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon and set the Hebrew people free, free to return to their land. But instead of a new Kingdom of equality, justice, and prosperity, the period and opportunity went by, and things reverted to the worst of how they had been in the past.

There was no certainty about what would come next, or what the fate of the people or nation would be. This is the setting for The Book of Daniel and its apocalyptic visions. When immediate prophecy and common expectations fail to materialize in the good ways in which many hoped, apocalyptic literature pulls back the frame of history and reality further still, to reveal a previously hidden world of spiritual forces in which God's purposes are still being worked out even in the face of chaos and disorder. The "take-away" message of apocalyptic literature is one of patience and perseverance in the face of the delay of justice and seemingly imminent disorder and disarray.

It draws upon ancient cosmologies, myths, fantastic imagery, and even fantasy, none of which are intended to directly correlate to any literal events, but evoke the spirit of the times. Its basic message is that "the world we hoped for, and dreamed of, is not yet, it is delayed for reasons that are far beyond our understanding... but let us press on doing what is right and good simply because it *is* right and good, for by doing so we will remain true to who we are, and to our true calling. In the end, the world will be saved, but only *after* we have endured much disruption. Despite all immediate evidence to the contrary, God still wills the good - healing and justice and order.

We have no exact parallel today to the genre of ancient apocalyptic literature. In some ways, it bears similarity to what we call "science fiction", which has its own internal rules and themes, but which serve to tell a deeper, more mythic story about order and chaos, and right and wrong. Because modern people today have no experience or much even understanding of apocalyptic literature, we misread it, scanning it for similarities of actual events today, as if it was a prophecy or a predictor of tomorrow's headlines. It is not.

But it sure feels true.; it has emotional resonance in times of great personal and cultural anxiety.

Like... say.... Right now?

In the Gospel for today, Jesus is with his disciples, who remark on the splendor and seeming permanence of the stone structures of the temple. As if they were always there and always will be there. And Jesus goes all apocalyptic on them. His mind is on other things - perhaps on the things to come.

The Gospel writer, Mark, finds great significance in Jesus's thoughts and expressions here. Remember, what we call the Gospel of Mark is taking form in a very specific period of time of just a few years prior to

the First Jewish-Roman War (66-74 BCE) or shortly thereafter. In other words, as these words are coming together, and choices and decisions are being made about what to leave in and what to leave out, the world around them is one big dumpster fire. In the year CE 70, after years of siege by Roman armies, Jerusalem is destroyed, and the Temple torn down. The Roman military commander Titus saw to it that only three towers would survive the flames to testify to what once was there.

What does any of this have to do with our situation today? The context is different, nobody is literally burning anything down, but many here today can relate to the feelings apocalyptic readings bring up.

In once sense, this is nothing new. As the church year winds down, and we approach the beginning of the new church liturgical year with the first Sunday of Advent, we will hear several readings that have apocalyptic overtones or undertones. As we prepare for the coming of Christ in what the scriptures call "the fullness of time", we experience the gap between the Dream of God (a time when righteousness reigns and all injustice is put away) and our very human efforts to create systems of justice and well-being here on our own terms. But this year, the readings resonate in a different way with many of us.

We hear in these ancient readings that things often get worse before they get better. Night grows darker before the dawning comes. Apocalyptic writings were a source of encouragement for people and cultures who felt they were in times of darkness and uncertainty. When you don't exactly know what the future holds for us and our loved ones.

And they can serve the same purpose today as they were intended to serve for those peoples long ago: They pull back the frame further still, and reveal that God is still at work in the world, even when *your eyes* can see no earthly evidence of that. And that work of God does not depend entirely *on us*, but it proceeds *in us*. Our faith does not change because of the one that's elected.

In a very real sense, folks, our task two weeks after the election is the same as it was two weeks before the election. Admittedly, the context is certainly different, but the call remains the same: To love God above all things, and to love your neighbor even as you love yourself.

Apocalyptic writings hold an invitation that we might take this moment, *our moment*, to recommit ourselves to the work of peace-making, the work of reconciliation, the work of fostering healing and furthering understanding, the work of upholding the dignity of each a every human being, and to reconciling the divisions within families and between neighbors.

At symbolic center of much of Christianity is the symbol of the cross: which transforms our fears and our even our terror into a Way of Life, Liberation, and Love.

You might have been here two weeks ago when we spoke of Martha, Lazarus' sister. In the midst of what felt like sure and certain death, she reached deep within herself, wrapped her arms around her hope, intertwined her fingers, and held on. She found her hope because she knew who holds the heavens themselves.

In the days ahead, may we find what Martha knew.

If the world feels filled with light to you right now, then, Hallelujah for you! Walk in the Light of our Savior who walked alongside the poor, the vulnerable, and the fearful.

And if the world feels like it is growing very dark right now, and that light is fading, light a candle. Light a THOUSAND candles. Light a hundred thousand candles! Light a bonfire for the good!

Know this:

There is no darkness, in all of heaven or earth, that can hold back the power of the light.

YOU. Are the bearers of that light.

That's all for today, friends. Amen.

Scriptures Appointed for Today

The Collect

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy

Scriptures to be written for our learning:

Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Daniel 12:1-3

The Lord spoke to Daniel in a vision and said, "At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

" the world we hoped for, and dreamed of, is not yet, it is delayed for reasons that are far beyond our understanding... but let us press on doing what is right and good simply because it *is* right and good, for by doing so we will remain true to who we are, and to our true calling."

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The Psalm - Psalm 16

Conserva me, Domine

1 Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you; *
I have said to the Lord, "You are my Lord,
my good above all other."

2 All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, *
upon those who are noble among the people.

3 But those who run after other gods *
shall have their troubles multiplied.

4 Their libations of blood I will not offer, *
nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.

5 O Lord, you are my portion and my cup; *
it is you who uphold my lot.

6 My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; *
indeed, I have a goodly heritage.

7 I will bless the Lord who gives me counsel; *
my heart teaches me, night after night.

8 I have set the Lord always before me; *
because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.

9 My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; *
my body also shall rest in hope.

10 For you will not abandon me to the grave, *
nor let your holy one see the Pit.

11 You will show me the path of life; *
in your presence there is fullness of joy,
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

The Epistle - Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. [And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”

he also adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.]

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The Gospel - Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”