

October 11, 2020
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 28, Year A
Isaiah 5:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Words for Funerals, Words to Live By

Three out of four of today's readings greeted me like old friends. They are readings that comforted me at the funerals of both of my grandparents. They are words that I have heard and reflected on and preached on at the funerals of so many of my beloved church members over the years. People that I have lived with and worshiped with and sung with and served with. People I have tried to comfort in their own losses, with the promises of our faith, with the promise of resurrection. People that I have celebrated with as children and grandchildren were married, as grandchildren and great-grandchildren were born, as the next generation of their families got educations and started careers and bought or built homes. People I have laughed with and people I have studied scripture with, and people I have eaten loaded plates of pancakes or potluck food with. People I have prayed with and communed with in their homes or nursing homes, as their health or their mobility kept them away from their church building, and as they experienced the fellowship of the body of Christ in cards and notes and phone calls from church members, in altar flowers delivered to their homes, in newsletters, in calls from council members, in visits from me and from others.

With these words, from Isaiah, from Psalm 23, and from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, I have tried to comfort grieving family members, grieving friends.

With these words, I have tried to make the hope that we have in Christ, intelligible to people who might only go to church for funerals, to pay respects, without ever really understanding why anyone would enter a building like ours to sit in rows and stand at some unspoken cue and sing and say words that people have been singing and saying for generations, for centuries, for millennia, in good times and in bad.

At the very beginning of Coronavirus experience on the fifth Sunday of Lent, which was March 29th, and also the third Sunday of our church lockdown, I preached about the grief of this time.

Of course, back then, on March 29th, like the rest of you, I had no idea of what we were facing. I had only just accepted that our Holy Week services would be online. I had some murky vision back then that when we would reopen our building, it would be at full strength, with everyone all together.

Back then we were still being told that one of the main ways that the virus was transmitted was by touch. Back then we didn't know, because scientists didn't know, that the biggest transmission danger of Covid-19 was breathing the same air as the other people. Back then I still didn't own a mask, as they weren't yet recommended to say nothing of mandated for ordinary people. Of course, back then I also wasn't going anywhere or seeing people in person other than those I lived with.

Re-reading that sermon is truly reading a sermon from another time. Of course it was from another time, March was six months ago, but it feels like it's from another time because, in spite of the fact that I knew that we were living during a strange and difficult time, the sermon made it clear that I had no concept of how long our lives would be changed or how profoundly. I wrote about how people were trying to send each other encouraging messages, sometimes funny, sometimes profound, sometimes poetic, "We're all in this together", "We'll get through this", "Don't forget shower"; things like that. I wrote about how so much

had stopped and it was clear in that sermon that I imagined that we would go from nothing to normal. That we would emerge from a lockdown that would last two, maybe three months, back into our lives as we had known them.

I realize now that I was in the beginning stages of grief. Which makes sense, three weeks into the loss of life as I had known it; life as we had known it. Denial was telling me that someday and perhaps someday soon things would get back to normal, that we just had to hang on, just for a little while, a month, maybe two. But now, as I am greeted by scripture readings that I think of as funeral readings, I am finding them friends, not just because they remind me of loved ones who have gone before me, not because they reiterate to me the promises and hopes of our faith, but because they come to me as one who is still grieving the experiences, the life that I had hoped for.

They come to me, to us, as we live in a society that is grieving, grieving the loss of things that we had come to take for granted, grieving the ease of being able to do what we want when we want without have to think, to prepare, to weigh risks and benefits, and alter patterns of behavior and interaction seem the most natural to us. They come to us as a society seeing the stages of grief played out in so many of our interactions with strangers and even with friends.

We see them all, played out over and over again, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. People overacting to things that would have been a minor irritant or not even noticed a year ago, people being harder on other people that they usually are, taking their frustration out on others, for no reason, people closing themselves off from others, people refusing to acknowledge the seriousness of the virus in an attempt to get back to normal.

There are a lot of ways people explain all that's going on, the way that people are acting, the way that we have gone from messages that "we're all in this together" to name-calling and blaming, and desperately resisting change, filled with

nostalgia, which causes us to look with a completely uncritical eyes toward the way things used to be.

The reality is that we are living through a communal trauma, a communal experience of grief and one of the ways to understand the ways that people are acting is to see in their behaviors, is the stages of grief playing out on a huge communal scale.

So, for me, the fact that these readings, that I associate with funerals, with grief, and with the promise and the preaching of resurrection, is like being met by friends who have brought me just what I need when I need them. I hear them, not in their original contexts, words spoken to ancient Israel or to a newborn church in an ancient city in Greece but in the context of what they have meant to me over the years.

The reading from Isaiah 5, gives us a vision of a feast, a feast spread for all peoples, all of the nations of the world, eating and sharing the abundance of the good things of this world. No longer grasping and hoarding, but experiencing God's providing care, equal and one at this mountaintop banquet, the mountain of the Lord, where death is destroyed, where tears are wiped away, where shame and disgrace are no more.

Over the graves and in the presence of the coffins and urns of people I have loved, of people you have loved, I have said,

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 5:9)

I say it because I believe it. That our beloved dead, who have reached that glorious day, that mountaintop banquet, where they feast in the presence of the

Lord, are no longer living in faith and hope. They have seen the Lord; the Lord for whom they waited. They have experienced their God's salvation. They can rejoice and be glad.

And so, I want to live in that vision, the vision of the fulfillment of the promises of God, for all peoples, which comes to sustain me in times of grief. It reminds me that the people for whom we grieve at funerals, the people whose lives we celebrate, the people whose faith we remember, also had times when their eyes were filled with tears. They too had times when they waited, in doubt, in worry, in wonder, and did not know when or how God's promises would be fulfilled in their lives. But our faith tells us that their time of waiting is over, their time of questions is over, their tears are wiped away. I hold this vision before myself in my own times of grief and trouble, trusting that someday, with my own beloved ones, I will see the Lord for whom I have waited.

And then in our reading for Philippians, in the words of a teacher and pastor to a beloved community, we hear the final words of someone who could not be with the ones he loved, but who still had a message for them. Paul, who says that he loved and longed for the church in Philippi, tells them,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:4-7)

He tells them that even though he is separated from his beloved ones. He tells them to rejoice, even though he has known suffering, beatings, and imprisonment. He tells them that the Lord is near, even though it is easy, when we

are struggling through this world, to feel like the Lord is far away. He tells them not to worry, but to pray. He promises them the gift of peace from God. And then he tells them what to fill their minds with:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

When I hear those words, which function as the beginning of Paul's farewell in the letter to the church in Philippi, at a funeral, I hear them as a word of farewell from our beloved dead. I hear them as words that remind us how to live; not filling ourselves up with bitterness, fear, anger, resentment, but instead filling ourselves up with things that are life giving.

We are about to enter our stewardship time in our congregation. Like so much else in our lives, our stewardship campaign will look different compared with other pledge opportunities in times past. We won't be able to gather for a salad potluck or an ice cream social like we did last year. We won't be able to go to each other's houses to meet and explain the vision of our ministry for the coming year. In fact, we're not even able to make detailed plans for the coming year, knowing that we are in a time of flux and change and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. For some of us, pledging will be even more of an act of trust than it ever has been before as make financial commitments in uncertain times. Some of us will have to give less because we've lost jobs or are working fewer hours. Some of us will need to give more because we're still employed and need to carry a bigger load than we're used to for the good of the community here, while our friends in Christ get their feet back under them. For sure we'll all need to pray and commit our time,

energy, and resources to the well-being of our church community during a time of upheaval in our world.

But if we ever think that it's all too much for us, then it's helpful to remember those saints who have gone before us; who stood firm in their own times of stress and certainly of grief, who lived through wars, natural disasters, times of political upheaval, and times of personal stress, change, and loss. Still they clung to the promises of their faith, still they worshiped, still they prayed, still they waited for the Lord.

We are living through our own time of stress, of change, of grief. And in this time may we cling to the promise that Paul shared with the church in Philippi, that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.