

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA; August 7, 2022

For most of our history, we have been very comfortable with the idea that “invisible” things existed. The world was enchanted with spirits and forces. There were gods and beings and angels and apparitions. Sacrifices were made, drink offerings poured out. At certain times of the year, the lines between different worlds or realms blurred and disappeared. Voices were heard, visions were seen, and the world was sacred.

But that isn't our world, is it?

One of the oddities of practicing this Christian tradition in this day and age, is that we cherish and maintain a collection of ancient stories that speak of what seems like a very different world. God shows up, right there, and speaks promises to people like Abraham and Sarah; and then they came true! When all those descendants later found themselves oppressed in Egypt, God showed up and worked their freedom through miracles and signs. Then God walked with the people through the wilderness, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and brought water out the rocks for them to drink. And on and on into a world of miraculous healings and resurrections, of water turned to wine, of transfigurations and visions and voices from the heavens.

Do we have space for those sorts of things anymore? In our world of test tubes and microscopes, of charts and graphs and exact sciences, do we still have the capacity to believe that God speaks and reveals? There really has been so much good to have come out of the last few centuries, this time we call “the modern world.” Really, a world of MRI-machines and airplanes and

global information is preferable in so many ways to a world without them. And I'm very glad for all the modern things our modern world has brought us. But it does leave us with a disconnect. So much of the sorts of things we say are true, so much of what we say is real, lies in that "invisible" part of the world. The promises of God in baptism, the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, the faith that the way of the cross leads to the empty tomb, the hope that a world where all have what they need and feel loved.... all this reside among the invisible things. The very idea of God, of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit reside among the invisible. And we live in a world that believes that the visible is real and the invisible... isn't. And so we find ourselves amid a tension: aware that there are those things seen and real, solid and knowable, measurable, observable, tangible, and yet hearing of those things that are invisible and perhaps wondering how much hope we can afford to have in them.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom..." It's the good pleasure of the Father, whom we cannot see, to give us the gifts of God, to give us the very Reign of God. And because of this, Jesus tells the disciples, we don't need to live in fear. This passage is the conclusion to the one we heard last week, with the story of the man who tore down his barns to build bigger barns to store his wealth. "You do need to be afraid of not having enough money or wealth," Jesus says, "so feel free to give generously. God will hold you always." And we talked last week about how these words from Jesus go beyond money and possessions but also speak to us about how we form our identities and where we find meaning. Join to this story about Abraham and joined to this these words

from Hebrews, the conclusion to this passage gives us yet another meaning.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom...” And part of that Reign that God gives to us is a deep faith to trust that the invisible things we hear about, the invisible realities, are really real. God gives us this trusting faith, this faith that moved Abraham's feet out the door and toward the Promised Land, that faith that carried the people through the wilderness, that faith that allowed Jesus to carry the cross and walk out of tomb.

But what I mean is not that we are given magical powers to believe in unbelievable things—at least, not exactly. Instead, like Abraham, like Israel, like Jesus, we are given the ability to take those first frightened, unsure steps in the way of Christ. And when we do, when we walk the path of the Anointed One, what we find is that the invisible things that make up the Reign of God come into our vision, become visible in new ways.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, not as a suspicious outcast to be avoided but as a child of God, she becomes a witness to God's Reign coming into the world. “Come and see,” she can't help but proclaim to those who were used to shunning her.

When Jesus meets those are sick and otherwise weighed upon, and rather than turning away from them as so many others do he chooses to turn toward them, to reach out and touch them, those who are used to feeling pushed aside are brought back in, healed and made new.

When Jesus meets those determined to make him their enemy, determined to defeat him, he refuses to reciprocate and see them as his enemy also, but instead calls out for forgiveness: “Forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Here and in these ways, Jesus makes the invisible things of God’s Reign—acceptance, mercy, forgiveness—the visible realities of the Reign of God.

And for those of us following in this way, looking at the world and wondering what is what isn’t real, we find that when we take those steps of faith, when we walk in the way of the Christ, we too see these invisible realities taking shape in front of us. When we meet those who are shunned or told to be ashamed of who they are, as the woman at the well was, and treat them as human beings worthy of dignity and respect, we see God’s Reign becoming visible in front of us. When we meet those in pain and suffering, either because of the frailty of their bodies or challenges in their minds, refusing to turn away but instead offering our own compassion, we see that Reign becoming visible in our world. And when we walk the way of forgiveness, of refusing to hold onto our anger or lash out at others, we see the good gifts of the Kingdom coming into focus, transforming our very world.

The God who has come amongst us, who has walked with Abraham, with Israel, with Christ, walks now with us, calling us into the world God loves. And step by faithful step, see the invisible things of the world—love, faith, mercy, compassion, generosity—taking shape in our world, becoming the visible sign of God’s presence here and now.

Amen.