

First Sunday Back

I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see all of you here today, even if all I see is your eyes above a mask and you struggle to see me through the glare of a face shield. I know you have the same kind of excitement that I do, finally being back in Trinity Cathedral after three months of absence.

It's still too early to ask what have we learned over those three months, because we are still learning. The experience is still fresh and still being made. I'm also mindful of what Canon Marlin Whitmer told us a couple of weeks ago that first we have to grieve what we have lost. Some have lost jobs that may not come back for a long time. Some have lost their health, and some even their lives. All of us have lost a sense of safety, of being able to go wherever we want to or do whatever we choose.

As a Christian I firmly believe that our faith speaks to whatever condition in which we find ourselves. God is with us wherever we are and whatever happens. That's a lesson Jesus taught us from the cross. And as a preacher of the Word, I'm also struck by how the Bible lessons appointed for a given Sunday speak to whatever we are encountering.

This morning, for instance, we are presented with conflict between two human beings, one with power and one without power. Sarah is incensed that her young son Isaac is playing with the older son of her slave Hagar, a son who in this passage is never named, indicating his lesser status. Sarah wants Abraham to throw them both out into the wilderness. What's really disturbing is that God seems to go along with it. God knows that reconciliation between the women will not be possible. It's clear that relationship to Abraham, not Sarah, determines whether someone has value. Sarah does have power, but only because she is Abraham's wife.

The male-oriented culture of ancient Israel even appears again after the slave woman and her child are sent away. When their water runs out, God provides for them because God hears the *boy*. Did you notice that? It's repeated in case we missed it. Hagar is the one weeping, but God responds to the boy's distress. This is not a hierarchy that sits well with us today, nor is it a good example of what some call the Bible's "family values."

Family conflict also shows up in the Gospel. Jesus is quite explicit that he has not come to bring peace on earth, but has come to set family members against one another. It does help to remember that this likely describes the actual situation in Matthew's community. At that time, becoming a Christian created serious conflict within both Jewish and pagan Greek families. Even today when some join the more fundamentalist and exclusionary branches of Christianity they may cut off others in their family.

During this time of pandemic and civil unrest, when tempers are frayed and grief is unresolved, families are also under stress. As Canon Whitmer said, the grief is expressed in denial, anger, bargaining, and sadness. Arguments have erupted in our own church community over the right way to protect ourselves from contagion and how to create justice for all in this country. That grieves me sorely. As I have said before, the Anglican tradition in general and the Episcopal Church in particular is a "big tent" in which people of wide beliefs should be able to find a home.

In the midst of this, St. Paul gives us heartening words in his letter to the church in Rome. Paul had a huge ego with which he struggled all his life. Yet after his transformative experience on the Damascus road, he always put Christ first, not himself. We must do the same. Paul wrote that through baptism we die to the old ways of living, so that we can rise into new life with Christ. The old ways are hard to give up, for sure. We have to work constantly to live into new ways of being. That's especially hard right now, because we don't know what those new ways will look like.

Every week since March 15, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has put together a five-minute video he calls "Habits of Grace." This past week he mentioned Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great twentieth century preacher at Riverside Church in New York City. In the midst of the Great Depression Fosdick wrote a hymn that we still sing. Bishop Curry quoted part of it, which I will do also as it expresses so keenly what we need.

God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy power;
crown thine ancient Church's story;
bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of thy salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving thee whom we adore.

Thank you for being here today, and thanks also to those watching from the safety of their homes. May God bless you all and fill you with the love of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.