

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, October 23, 2011.

(Deuteronomy 34:1-12; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46)

I have to say I never thought I'd see the day, at least if you had told me decades ago, this is what I would say -- I would never thought I'd see the day when Americans would gather in Washington, D.C. on the mall with a magnificent memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while there was a sitting black president and while there was a contender for the Republican nomination who's also African-American. I never thought I'd see the day. There's just things in life that right now are probably on your list of "I never thought I'd see the day," but yet we did. Maybe some of you thought you'd never see the day when the Berlin wall would come tumbling down. I suspect there's some of you who sit here who never thought you'd see the day there was a woman rector of St. Luke's. For some, that was a good thing; for some, maybe not. I don't know.

There are still things, I think, that we say, "Not in my lifetime." I have to say when I was much younger, I really thought that I would see the day that the Roman Catholic church would accept women as priests and that priests would marry. I really thought that 20 years ago. I have to say I have to shift that back over to my "I think not in my lifetime." There's those things, right? "I think not in my lifetime." And that's all right. Things evolve and things change. There's things that go back over, "Maybe not in my lifetime, but someday." But then just by nature of the fact that we're human and we're mortal, there are lists of things that we will never see. We don't quite know what's on that list, but there are things we will never see. My father never got to meet his three youngest grandchildren. He didn't get to meet them. There are things that we will never get to see. And I think to the degree that we learn to accept that as part of learning to accept our mortality and to give thanks for the things we never thought we would see but see as well as accept that there are some things we will never see in our lifetime and there are things we will just never see.

Moses, when the Lord has him climb to the top of Mount Nebo to get a great view of the promised land, he gets to see it, but he doesn't get to enter it. After 40 years of leading very grumpy people through the wilderness, constantly avoiding either death from starvation or from enemies, the promise is right there. It's just on the other side of the River Jordan and Moses climbs up and looks, and he gets to look to the far north and see the Sea of Galilee, he looks west and sees the Mediterranean, he looks south and sees the wilderness of the Negev, he sees the River Jordan, he sees it, but he does not get to cross over. He is not allowed to cross over, even though he has been this tireless leader, this intermediary between God and the grumbly people, even Moses has fallen short and God has told him he will not be allowed to cross over.

So I wonder how he felt as he stood there taking in this vast promised land that he himself would not be allowed to enjoy. And it's interesting, while it was a form of a punishment in some ways, a chastening of Moses, there's still in the text as we read it, a moment of satisfaction, an accomplishment, not punishment. A sense of when it's appreciated that Moses is one of a job

well done, a faithful servant. It's more of a moment of "Come, Moses, lay down your weary burdens and enjoy knowing not what you will enjoy, but enjoy knowing that God is good to his promises. God has brought you and your people thus far. God has been true to this covenant that you made and that God is trustworthy."

It's just the nature of being a human being that our lives are finite and death eventually comes for us all. It's just the nature of being a human being that there will be things that we'll never get to see happen, but we are called into the story of the promised land to believe in God's promises. I think we have something to learn from Moses' final mountain top experience. That God is good and merciful and trustworthy. That despite setbacks and detours, despite our grumpiness and our doubts, despite long seasons when God can seem to disappear, when nights are long and lonely, we can still know by faith, if not always in our heart, that God is at work in all things, working for good in all things.

We just have choices. We have choices. The Hebrew slaves could have chosen to stay in Egypt and not gone to all the trouble. They could have chosen in the wilderness to remain worshipping false idols, and some did. From the time God planted the Garden of Eden and told Adam and Eve, "Do not eat," and of course so they did eat, humanity has had choices. So for those who choose to seek the Lord, for those of us who want to be faithful to our covenant with God, especially for those times when we fall woefully short of obeying the commandments of the Lord, even then God is still trustworthy. We can trust God even when we cannot trust ourselves.

I wonder what Moses would make this morning if he were on this small mountain top looking out over his people. Would he recognize us? Would he recognize us as people of the covenant? This is how far the heirs have come. We are the heirs now of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses. We are that community called to faithfulness, called to maintain trust in the promise of God. And yet, my friends of the mainline church, our church is declining. We know that, right? Our church is in trouble. Our mainline, Protestant churches are in trouble. Ironically, the more tolerant and open and inclusive that we've become, the more a message has come out that church is just sort of an option. Try it out, check it out, you might like it. In all of our ability to be nice, we may be nice-ing ourselves right out of a calling and a commandment.

In the reading from the Gospel, when Jesus gives us that wonderful summation of the law, he is quoting the Old Testament, he is quoting the great Shema. "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus is quoting scripture and transforming scripture. Jesus is not inviting us to be nice people. Jesus is not inviting us to hold the door for somebody so that they will hold the door for you another time. Jesus is not inviting us to bring soup one day to a neighbor so that that neighbor will bring soup to you another day. Jesus is commanding us, for those of us who choose, to enter into a community of radical love. If we are going to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind, it will be hard work. It will take intention, it will take time, it will take focus, it will take resources.

The commandment to love God and love neighbor, when it comes from Jesus, expands from its Old Testament context of just love the people who are in your tribe, who are in your group, who

are in your neighborhood, who are your kin. Jesus in his ministry, in his life, in his death and resurrection, expands that to love your enemies, love the stranger, love those who even stand outside of what you find acceptable. This takes work and commitment and sacrifice.

Every now and then I stand up on this small hill of St. Luke's, this little corner of the vineyard, which is sort of elevated and sort of not, and I look out. Now mind you, you've got to be careful about mountain top experiences because it seems to me sometimes you get up on that mountain, at least according to today's reading, and then something happens and you die. So I'm not planning on that and I'm planning on being around, but I am kind of standing up, taking a look and looking out. And while I see some things that worry me, I see some fatigue, I see some tiredness, every now and then a little anxiety about the future, let me tell you what I also see. I see this parish holding up a story of salvation through the beauty of the liturgy and our prayer book and our traditions. I see a parish holding that up and saying, how do we carry this forward to a new day, a new generation and people to come? I see us as being at our own crossing of Jordan as a parish. I see us asking questions of what do we want to carry forward from the past, celebrate in our present and be ready to have changed and transformed so that it can go into the future. It's a time for St. Luke's to be dreaming. And we have been dreaming. We just don't want to dream too small. And we don't want to move too fast or with fear or with stress.

Sometimes I look out, perhaps projecting, and I do see the tiredness. Especially after a weekend like we've had - yard sales and barbecue sales and people staying up all night - people working hard for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of our neighbor. But let me tell you what I also look out and see on a Tuesday night at St. Luke's. I see 30 people gathered in part of the parish working with silent, contemplative prayer bringing God close to heart and mind and spirit in the power of prayer. It's very, very moving to be silent and share silent prayer with others. While at the same time, in another part of the campus, children and tutors and teachers and parents gather that children might find an increased ability to achieve their own God-given potential. Busy and loud loving neighbor, and in its own way contemplating God, and then the silent prayer in its own loud way celebrating the presence of God. I see life at this parish. I see life at this parish as it seeks to find new ways. So the Stew-n-Cue is new, will it go on? Will it not? We hope so, but we know not. Because it comes time for some to step back and others to step forward, and it always makes us a little anxious. And so we go back up to the mountain top.

On the night before he died in Memphis, our greatest modern prophet also had his own view of the promised land. Martin Luther King saw it in the midst of striking sanitation workers. He saw that a land of freedom has to be a land transformed, and it can't just be about a nation, but it has to be global people. It has to include poor people. He was changed in what he understood to be the civil rights of some into becoming human rights for all. And following Jesus, he saw the way to freedom for the whole people. He saw it as a crossing that he was making in his own life as he was about to experience from his enemies. And he said this that night as he preached in a church in Memphis. "It doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountain top and I don't mind. Like anybody, I'd like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And God's allowed me to go up to the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people, we will get to that promised land. And I'm

happy tonight," Dr. King continued to preach. "I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

And of course the next day Dr. King was assassinated. But yet, the promise continued and dreams of those people have come true. And you know what our duty is now as people of St. Luke's, as Christians is three-fold. To dream, dream about the future. Not about your legacy or our legacy, but at a future that from this place looks out and welcomes people to God. But it doesn't just stop with a dream. It also goes on to recognizing the hard work that comes to achieving a dream. And then it goes on to realize that hard work in and of itself brings a certain kind of joy.

I came across this poem recently, very short. "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I woke and found that life was duty. I acted and found that duty was joy." It is our great duty to listen to the commandments of the law giver, Jesus. It is our great duty to understand that duty as our dearest joy. When Moses gets to that mountain top at the end of his life, when he looks out over the Jordan River, when he looks back at that grumbly group of people and looks in to the face of God, Moses felt in his bones that his duty was also his joy. May we also come to that moment of life, whenever it comes, to know that our greatest joy has been to serve God and our greatest duty in serving Him has brought us that joy. Amen.