

Sermon Pentecost 7A: Rev Margaret Otterburn 7-19-2020

One of the questions you might be asking after four months of living in the covid-19 virus is, "Where is God in all this?" You may be watching the news, noting the daily increases in the numbers being infected and the number who have, very sadly, died. The you are made aware of the behaviors of some citizens in our country and compare it with countries with almost zero new cases of the covid virus. You may feel discouraged and then wonder why God is letting this happen. Or of course you may have decided that God has given us the free will to conduct ourselves as we think best and thus, we have to deal with what happens ourselves. We do of course have free will and I believe God would love us to make good decisions and keep safe and well, and to allow others to be safe and well too. Living with others, our families can sometimes be challenging. Jacob's story, the one we heard a little of in our first reading today is full of challenging family relationships. Jacob had left home really because his brother Esau had threatened to kill him. His father sent him to get a wife from their extended family in Haran and waved him good bye, as it were. But he is fleeing, not from God but from the threat of fratricide. And God meets him. He did not know God was there, keeping him safe, watching over him. He had that amazing dream, the ladder going up to heaven, "Jacob's ladder." God came to Jacob unexpectedly. Up until now God had not been mentioned in the chapters in Genesis as a significant part of Jacob's life, in fact no part at all. But in this dream when being away from his family for the first time ever, all alone, with no GPS to direct him and maybe just some sort of a path to walk on and possibly the stars he must have felt very afraid and lonely. Going to sleep in the middle of nowhere must have been a big challenge for this home boy! It was to Jacob alone and scared that God came. Jacob felt the presence of God, had a dream of the presence of God. When he awoke, he knew God was there, right there where he was. He was no longer all alone; God was with him. He wanted to show that this was the place God had come to him, so he sanctified it and called it Bethel where El means "God" and Beth-el means "House of God." Yes, God found him.

Our psalm today is a part of psalm 139 and it begins, "Lord you have searched me out and known me," and a verse later says, "You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways." Have you ever said these words? They may be very comforting in that it is good to know God is with you in all you do. Of course, you may not want God to be around to see some of the things you say or do, but that is another matter.

However, if we recall the words St Paul wrote to the Romans we read, "but you have received the spirit of adoption." I do not know if any of you have adoptive parents; if you do, I am sure they would have said how special you are because you were specially chosen by them. Birth parents have the children they birth but adoptive parents have a choice. They chose to become parents and they chose their children and love them; just as biological parents love their children. In the same way Paul is saying God has chosen to adopt you and make you apart of the family. You are special to God. When you are feeling alone, stressed, and afraid, when

life is out of control remember that God is always with you; God adopted you because God loves you.

And Paul also reminds us that we live in hope, always hope for the future, for the unknown but with the surety God is with us. We heard from his letter today, "In hope you are saved," Our book group just discussed "The Nightingale" a book which described life in France during the WWII. Towards the end of the book Isabelle and her friend are in a concentration camp but live in the hope that they will survive, and the Nazi regime will end. At the zoom Messiah meeting last Monday, I asked, "What were the signs of God's presence they had recently felt?" as I felt these would be signs of hope for the future. One person spoke of two people she knew with Parkinson's who are recovering from the covid-19 virus. This was definitely a sign of God's grace and is also a sign of hope for their future. Another person spoke of how helping at the NJ Community Food Bank had been a sign of God's grace; obviously being able to help by being there, but also being in a place where everything seems very efficient and centered on getting good food to those in need. We have opened the thrift shop and a lot of shoppers have come, new customers as well as the many we know and love. Their appreciation of our shop was a wonderful sign of God's grace, and the fact they are buying items for the future is another sign of hope.

God's presence in your life, hope for your future is very positive, is it not? But, oh dear, you also need to remember you heard Jesus speaking in a parable. Suddenly you need to be ready to be challenged and challenged by the concept of judgement.

In the movie "Just Mercy" the so-called evidence which convicts Walter McMillian, a black man, as the man who shot a teenage white girl is from, Ralph Myers, himself a convicted felon. Myers admits to lawyer Bryan Stevenson that growing up in foster care, as a child an incident with fire left him terrified of fire and burning. So, the mere thought of having his life ended by being electrocuted filled him with such terror he agreed he would have said anything to avoid it. Stevenson discovered that although Myers admitted right after the murder, he knew nothing about the murder, he was given the opportunity to get out of death row and thus avoid the electric chair. It was terror of being electrocuted that made him willing to do whatever the police demanded of him. So, he said what the police wanted him to say, he gave the false testimony that enabled the police to arrest Walter McMillian and have him quickly convicted and put on death row. The police and legal system planted seeds in Myers minds, seeds which convinced him to be a liar. In the Gospel today Jesus tells us plainly that the seeds of lies, the evil that intentionally is in people's hearts is in our world. But at judgement time it will be revealed and those guilty will be punished. It sounds scary but Ralph Myers is not the only person willing to tell lies to save himself from pain and death. The movie stated that Stevenson's organization, the "Equal Justice Initiative" had already saved 140 men, from the death penalty over the relatively short time it has been in existence.

A question to you, What seeds has you sown in your life? Have you always sown seeds of truth, seeds which proclaimed the word of God, seeds which promoted a person's growth

rather than their demise? Are you willing to ponder over this? But can you remember telling lies, sowing seeds which would be detrimental to someone's well-being, their progress, their happiness? These seeds may have been sown a long time ago. Did you try and deal with the lies and find a way of reconciliation? In the "Just Mercy" movie, finally the case against Walter McMillian was closed and all charges dropped; he was innocent and thus justice was done, an innocent man was allowed to go home. Sometimes you cannot be reconciled to the person you wronged because they have died. Your confession then is to God for the good of your soul. Judgement day will come, Jesus told you. His parable of the wheat and the weeds was understood by his listeners as they knew these awful weeds grew with the wheat and in the early stages of growth was hard to distinguish between the wheat plants and these weeds. At harvest time the whole crop was gathered and spread out; the weeds were grey in color at that point and could be removed from the wheat crop and discarded. These weeds were slightly poisonous, so it was important to discard them all. This realistic picture of judgement must have been alarming to Jesus' listeners. They did not want to think they would be picked out as "bad" on judgement day and thrown into the fire where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It must have been a wake call then and is one today.

What you do each day counts; God is aware of it. As the psalmist of psalm 139 reminded you, "where can I go then from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" Have you tried waking up each morning and saying to God, "Dear God I commit today to you," Imagine doing this even before you hit the bathroom or put the coffee on? Then at the end of the day how about saying to God, "Thank you for being with me today," even just that. Of course, you can extend it and think about all the things you want to thank God for. If you have trouble falling asleep, have you tried doing that as a way to get to sleep. If you realize next morning your list was incomplete you can complete it later. It is never too late to thank God for the good things in your life.

You can also reflect on another verse of this psalm, one near the end of today's portion, "Search me out, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my restless thoughts." If you have ever tried to do a time of meditation or contemplative prayer you will understand the phrase "restless thoughts." Often during your intended prayer time your mind takes you in many directions. What you may want to do is to say to yourself, "that's a great thought, but go to the parking lot until later." If you really would like God to "search you out," then being willing to spend even 5 minutes a day in contemplative prayer will help. The psalmist obviously knew it. Could you commit to even 5 minutes a day this week, alone with God? When you are sitting somewhere nice or alone on a walk, but when it's not 90 degrees in the shade of course.

So today I am hoping that you will re-read and pray psalm 139 during the week. Say it and pray it to feel God near you, just as God was with Jacob and with Paul.

During this continuing time of the covid-19 virus crisis be aware of God's presence with you, God's love surrounding you and God's loving arms upholding you each day of your life.
Amen

