

November 22, 2020

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 95:1-7a: O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24: For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Ephesians 1:15-23: I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

## SERMON: “Come Build Us in Your Reign”

If you have ever been to one, I bet you remember. Because how could you not? If you have ever been to one, I bet you were swept away in sight and sound, smell, touch, and taste too. For it is overflowing with each and every one of them. If you have ever been to a high and holy Mass in the Anglican tradition, you will not forget it. As the congregation settles in, the organ rises to a great crescendo, holding the last note until your attention is fully gathered, no matter where it might have been wandering. And then, as those grand, high and holy notes fade away, carried as if on a gentle breeze, another sound, a tiny sound, the perfectly clear and simple sound of a single bell rings out. In utter contrast to the blast of the organ and yet perhaps even more commanding. Now not just your mind but your body fully on edge waiting in anticipation.

Next to be engaged is smell and touch, from the sacristy wafting out gently, majestically, pungently, the acrid odor of incense, a thurifer swinging from the end of a chain, filling the room, enveloping the body – both the one gathered and each of our own – in mystery that beckons. Even as you are registering this new aliveness, forward comes a procession of crucifer and candle, of clergy adorned in absolutely extravagant robes, a myriad of colors decorating the sanctuary, flowing in fabric and color, cascading in glory. And finally, processing in, lingering behind, are the elements of the high and holy meal, the reminder of the presence of Christ himself, entering slowly and majestically. And if you aren’t fully present, fully in awe, fully in love and wonder, don’t worry, for throughout the rest of the service there will be movement, there will be silver brought out so bright that it will blind your eyes, raiment will be changed to fit the mood, purpose and grandeur of the liturgy. It will be highly choreographed, full of bowing and serving, full of movement and elements, some of which are as familiar to you as your next breath, and others that defy understanding but command interest. If you have ever been to a high, solemn Mass in the Anglican tradition, I bet you would remember. For who could forget?

*(Underneath the sermon soft piano music begins. Noah Palmer plays the hymn: “O God Beyond All Praising” to the tune Thaxted by Gustav Holst.)*

And that is the point after all. No, not that we don’t forget the service or the majesty of the human endeavor. But rather, what is engraved on our heart is the ultimate awe and wonder of the God to whom such a thing points, worships, adores and praises.

I love the simplicity of our tradition, the simple grace-filled approach to faith that unfolds in the most plain of rooms, even if we dress it up now and then. And yet, in our faith walk and in our living, there needs to be room for a Sunday just like the high Anglican holy Mass. Just like a day called Reign of Christ or Christ the King. For the psalm we started with today is a psalm that makes no bones about it, that God is above all things. It proclaims from the mountaintops that God has done great things and is doing them yet still. The Anglicans often practice liturgies that don’t domesticate God to our own yearnings or the needs of this particular moment. But instead, it expands our imagination, expands our awe and wonder of the God who is in and above and through and under all things, no matter how bad they might be. A liturgy that never confines God to our place and time, but lifts our hearts, our faith, our imagination and our praise to the God who was, is, and always will be the God of life, death, and resurrection too. For that liturgy points to a God who doesn’t just stand against all that is wrong and diminishing, but climaxes in

the truth of this communion table, that God comes to join us in standing for what is good, true and right. A God who invites us to stand right there in the midst of all the majesty and awe, not just receiving this great gift of faith as a gift to be beheld secondhand, but instead invites us in to the majesty and purpose of it all, that we might live our faith firsthand and encountered. Despite all of our Puritan Congregational nervousness, the high Anglican Mass serves not to draw our attention to what *we* can do, but rather to what God is still doing. Taking the best, most beautiful dramatized and sensory experience and pointing through it and beyond it.

This tune that Noah is playing right now is one of the most majestic tunes that I know. It's a text so perfect for Christ the King Sunday, written by Gustav Holst. It has been set to a hymn text that reads like this:

O God, beyond all praising, we worship you today,  
and sing the love amazing that songs cannot repay.  
For we can only wonder at every gift you send,  
at blessings without number and mercies without end.  
We lift our hearts before you and wait upon your Word.  
We honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord.

*(Noah brings the music to a loud crescendo playing it one more time majestically.)*

If you've ever seen it, I bet you remember. Because how could you not? If ever you have seen it, I bet you were swept away in love and emotion. Not because that was the goal, but because it is an undeniable reaction. If you've ever seen a parent spring into action to protect, to soothe, or to love her child, whether in bold or dramatic ways, putting themselves in harm's way. Or in the gentlest of actions, like wiping away a tear. Or simply holding a child for what must seem like an eternity as that child wails and moans, simply rocking the precious one, saying over and over again, Shhh, I love you, Shhh, it will be okay. My bet is that your heart and mind come to life in ways that defy logic or reason. I bet you still remember when you happened upon such a scene. And how could you not? Because that is hardwired into who you are, for it is in the very nature of God the Creator to be a loving, soothing, caring, kind parent. We are in God's own image, and it is with God's own breath and spirit that we have been created and animated.

*(Underneath the sermon soft piano music begins. Noah Palmer plays the hymn: "My Shepherd is The Living God" to the tune Consolation.)*

For on this day, and in the great sweep of history of our faith, we know this truth: that God is both above and beyond, majestic and mysterious, and immediately together here and with us, compassionate and kind. God is sovereign and superior, and instantly likewise humble, serving and never inferior. If today could equally be known as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, to remind us exactly who Christ is, and to draw us out beyond ourselves, it is also critically important to hold that in balance with the how and why Christ exemplifies that holiness of who God is and how God lives. Intimate relationship, goodness, caring for the least of these, searching for the lost, going to the ends of the earth and beyond to simply hold the outcast in his loving arms. "O how I have desired to gather you under my wings like a mother hen," said Jesus.

Almighty and powerful, yes, loving and caring, always. Throughout the sweep of Scriptures, God and Jesus, God Incarnate, is understood not just as the Author of the spinning planets, not just the Lord of Hosts, but always the gentle vanguard of justice, and the loving giver of kindness.

Where most gods demand blessing, our God offers it time and time again, not because we deserve it but because we need it. Where most gods want to be lavished in care, our God offers care and kindness, even if it places God and Christ himself in the most harmful and torturous of places. Where most gods demand ultimate and never-ending perfect devotion, our God seeks the lost and brings back the strayed. Where most gods sit enthroned in protected vaults in the sky, our God takes the form of shepherd to protect us, to feed us, binding our wounds, strengthening us when we are weak. Or just as importantly, strengthening us when all the forces of the world seem so strongly arrayed against us.

Not only that. The prophet Ezekiel in our second reading points to this one last trait of our parenting, shepherding God that we can't miss. God doesn't hold onto power for power's sake. God doesn't own all that power that God must just be recognized, even and especially if it's power to love and heal. Instead, God pours it out. God gives it away. I'm going to give all that power, God said, the power of a shepherd to my servant David, and to David's house, and to all who will follow in David's footsteps, even especially the One we celebrate today, the One we will begin waiting for again next week, the One who called God mighty and powerful over and over again in Scripture. Jesus presented God as the ruler of all things. And yet also with his next breath called God "Abba," Papa, Mama, Nurturing Saving One.

The great Easter hymn that Noah is playing right now reminds us:

My shepherd is the living God, I therefore nothing need.  
In pastures fair, near pleasant streams you settle me to feed.  
You bring my wandering spirit back when I forsake your ways,  
And lead me for your mercy's sake in paths of truth and grace.

*(Noah plays through the hymn one more time with gentleness and peace.)*

Those moments when it comes together, we can't forget them, can we? Those moments in our shared journey of faith, whether in moments of high and holy or small and lowly, whether in moments of the joy of a baptism or the grief of a funeral, whether in services like Christmas or ones in the most ordinary of times, whether gathered around this communion table or your table at home, when things come together as a church, and in those moments where we transcend this moment and this body to really be church, those are moments we can never forget.

If you haven't had such a moment with us yet, keep coming, keep abiding, keep opening, for they are here. And if you have had a moment like that, text me about it so that I might know what brings your heart joy and life. But once we have those moments as church, we can't forget them, can we? We cannot go back to the way we were, could we, because things have changed.

Paul experienced that truth, the one who wrote this stunning letter to the Ephesians, and he would never be the same. Not just what happened in that blinding light on the road to Damascus, not just in those big and holy moments where he was face to face with Christ himself. But as this letter points out, in those moments when the Body of Christ here on earth, those fledgling little churches he served and cared for, shepherded and led, when it came together not just *for* them but *through* them, it extended to the whole world. Paul lifts up joy like he does today when the church exhibits faith in hard times, when the church pours forth love in the midst of the unknown, when the church lives up to its calling to be the radical countercultural embodiment both of the God of the whole universe and the One who chooses to dwell in pastures green. In Paul's amazing letter to the Ephesians, our third and final reading, he writes about this endeavor you and I cling to – becoming church.

*(Underneath the sermon soft piano music begins. Noah Palmer plays the hymn: "The Church's One Foundation" to the tune Aurelia.)*

In this letter, Paul exhorts the church in Ephesus, and Stockbridge too, to dedicate ourselves to the one simple task: to get to know Christ deeply and fully that we might become Christ. To really know him, as Paul writes in this letter, in poetry that even Rilke would be impressed by, that the eyes of our hearts become enlightened. So that we find hope and calling too, that we find and claim the power that is his, the power that Jesus over and over told his disciples they already had, and we do too. The power to risk something big for something good. Over and over, and again today, Paul reminds us that our task as church is to spend our whole being and essence getting to know this One we call Christ.

I don't know if you've gotten to where you fully needed to this liturgical year, whether you have come to fully know and embrace Jesus the Christ, Jesus the shepherd, the Lord of all and the Servant of everyone. I don't know if you have gotten to know him enough that the eyes of your heart are enlightened and set on fire for goodness and grace. For Paul sure knew that the world needed it in those times, and if you're awake even a little, you know how desperately knowing Christ and the power that comes with it is needed in our times, to rule in love and grace, to welcome in and to cherish.

If you have discovered something about Christ this year that enlivens your heart and hands, please text that to me, so that I might know it and ponder it in my heart. And if you haven't, that's okay too, for in seven short days we will begin a new year, and each of us, no matter what we have found this year, will have the chance to let it all go. To wait in hope, to open our minds in anticipation, and to embrace a spirit of revelation. That all we do, all we say, all we are as the Body of Christ reflects nothing short of Christ himself – our king, our ruler, our servant, our shepherd, our one foundation. For as the touchstone hymn proclaims:

'Mid toil and tribulation, and the tumult of our war,  
We wait the consummation of peace forevermore;  
'Til with the vision glorious our longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious shall be the church at rest. Amen.

*(The sermon ends with the hymn being played triumphantly before being sung by Andrea.)*