

Proper.6A.2020

It's been a tough time since the death of George Floyd on May 25th. Since Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, and all those who have died in the years after Trayvon Martin in 2012. Frankly, it's been a tough time since the death of Emmett Till, in 1955. And so many more dark skinned people senselessly killed – you can read about all of them if you search “Say Their Names.” A cancer has been growing in the Body of Christ for a very long time, for the entire history of humankind. Because whoever claims the power of the majority has a tendency to ostracize those who are not in that group, because of whatever might distinguish that majority group from others. Currently the distinguishing cancer that has sickened humankind is systemic racism, and it is sinking the Body of Christ to the ground, struggling to breathe.

We all have responded in different ways. Some have gotten out and demonstrated. Perhaps once, or perhaps day after day. Some have shouted their rage and frustration. Leadership on all levels, from local police departments to the president and his staff, are struggling to respond meaningfully. Still others, appropriately cautious of the coronavirus, have felt it impossible to be close to other people and have felt shut in and powerless.

And where is God in all of this? Deep in our hearts, we know that God weeps for the current state of the creation, and holds those who are grieving. But some nagging voice is whispering to us all, and it says, “Has there ever been anything like this before? That has gone global? What is going to happen now? Can we make real progress?”

And so we turn to our scriptures, which we know contain wisdom and strength for what we encounter in our life with God. Today we get Abraham and Sarah. We are told that both Abraham and Sarah were very old. We first meet Abram, as he was called then, four chapters earlier in Genesis. God leads Abram to the land of Canaan and promises it to him and to his offspring. But Abram and his wife have not been able to have any children. During a famine, Abram and Sarai move to Egypt, and eventually back home, where he makes his home under the oaks of Mamre. Still . . . no children. Abram lives through a battle, rescues his nephew, and hears from God who promises him again that his descendants will be numerous. But, still... no children. Abraham and Sarah's slave produce a son, but God says this descendant is not the one promised. And Abram is 86 years old. Another 13 years go by and as Abram reaches 99, God makes a covenant with him and changes his name to Abraham, and Sarai's to Sarah to signify this milestone. And God promises a son, who is to be named Isaac. But how could this be possible? And that brings us to today's reading, when in a positively surreal moment, three strange visitors arrive to deliver the news that Sarah at her advanced age, will conceive and bear a son. And Abraham is 100 years old, and they are no longer childless. And God, steadfast and true, has brought forth descendants of Abraham and Sarah from the impossible to the possible; two old people whose biological clocks had long since wound down. And Sarah laughs at the news. Because it just seems preposterous to her, not to mention impossible. Abraham and Sarah were faithful: they did as God instructed them and they kept listening, and behold – Sarah laughed again for joy at the birth of her son.

The story of Abraham and Sarah has a lot in common with our gospel for today – ordinary people through whom God does extraordinary things. This Sunday begins the long green season of the Sundays after Pentecost. The title of the season itself seems to challenge us: what will our response to the Gift of the Holy Spirit be? It is time to go back to the beginning of the story of Jesus and the calling of the disciples, and learn once again what it means to be a follower of the Christ.

And so we begin in the ninth chapter of Matthew. Just previous to our gospel for today, Jesus has called the last disciple, Matthew the tax collector. These accumulating disciples have been following Jesus around and have witnessed his authority over unclean spirits, and Jesus' healing of every sickness and disease. They are being formed, one person at a time. And now, all twelve are together, and something they surely never expected has happened. They are being sent out to do what Jesus has been doing. And here, we learn something important about leadership. In Jesus' world, it doesn't matter too much where you come from, the fishing boat or the tax authority. We don't hear of any aptitude tests for leadership. The disciples' readiness for compassionate ministry has been assessed by Jesus as he has lived and traveled with them. He knows they are ready because he has been forming their very souls. What matters is the mission ahead of them, their future as agents called to help bring about the Reign of God come on earth.

And now: the instructions that Jesus gives the disciples as a complete group. They are very detailed and complete, from what they should pack to what they should say. The instructions include what to do if they are welcomed, and what to do if they need to leave and move on. They include frank warnings about betrayal in families and the fate awaiting them at the hands of the civil authorities. They can't waste time, because Jesus' overarching metaphor of the harvest is driving everything. The harvest is ready, and is plentiful, but the laborers are few. "When they persecute you in one town," says Jesus, "flee to the next."

And in these instructions and warnings, we hear an echo. The harvest is now. The harvest has spread from one town to the next, across the oceans from one continent to another. The harvest is today, June 14, 2020. Committed and commissioned people have answered Jesus' call and have tirelessly insisted that the time for the casting out of the evil of systemic racism and the hope of healing is now. They are speaking words of truth, especially to those of us who are privileged because of something we did nothing to earn. The crowds are harassed and helpless to change by themselves what must be changed by all of us, with God's help. Shepherds are emerging, leaders are coming to the front.

It must be acknowledged that opportunists have not heard the voice of the shepherd and are taking advantage of unrest to destroy and loot businesses and property. But as destructive as this is, it must not distract us from the positive movement toward justice for all of God's people. The continued protests have become more peaceful and focused each day.

Those first disciples were called away from average, working class jobs, and not because of their skills. They were called solely because they were children of God, and they were invited to share in the ongoing creation of the reign of God come on earth. You and I are called to nothing less. Like them, we may feel we are unequal to the task. Like them, we may have no special training. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are called to be faithful, to believe that God's promises are sure and will come to pass. And like Abraham and Sarah, the wait is over and the time is now.

We have been entrusted with a mission, because we too are disciples. Ready or not, skilled or not, we are the laborers sent to bring in the harvest. "The kingdom of God has come near," we are called to proclaim, but it is not enough to speak the words. The words must be accompanied by works of exorcism and healing. The exorcism need not be violent, but we must address and work to eliminate not only our own racism and prejudice, but even more important, that which infects the whole Body of Christ and sickens it. Because what sickens one of us sickens us all.

The mission is going to be difficult. We might find ourselves at odds with family members and people we love, Jesus warns. We could be dragged before civil authorities. This mission is not without pain

and risk. But the mission is also deeply rewarding, because we are all part of the Body of Christ, that living, breathing body that works tirelessly for the Reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven. We labor alongside others who have heard the call and are ready to engage the mission to know God in Christ, and make Christ known to others. The Body of Christ is loved and supported by the Trinity: the Creator, the Redeemer and the Advocate. The Creator loves us beyond measure, the Redeemer lights the path ahead, and the Holy Spirit continues to advocate, inspire and move us forward. With this limitless and unfailing love, what can stop us now? Come fellow laborers, let us help bring in the harvest.