



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

I will, with God's help (2)

Sermon for Pentecost 3, June 5, 2016

Readings: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

Sermon text: Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? *People:* I will, with God's help. (Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer, p. 305)

This is the second of three sermons on the promises of the Baptismal Covenant.

We have been looking at the beliefs and practices involved in being a follower or disciple of Christ over the past several weeks, first by reviewing what we believe as Christians about God the Three-in-One, and secondly about the promises we make when baptized or initiated in the the Way. Last week we looked at the first two questions of the Baptismal Covenant. This morning I would like us to consider the third question: “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

So, what is “the Good News”?

There is no lack of news in the world, good and bad—though very little is really new. The bad news probably comes first to mind, for that is covered on the news media. For instance, some seven hundred people drowned last week trying to cross from Africa to Europe. These are a small part of the many thousands fleeing drought, famine and war in sub-Saharan Africa. They join with the many thousands fleeing civil war in Syria. The world is awash with refugees. Bad news: it is going to get worse as climate change accelerates and the population continues to grow.

Near at hand, a young man, a high school senior related and known to a number of you sitting here, died in a car crash. Terrible news, a true tragedy, a life cut short. Hearts are broken. The grief will subside over time but will never disappear; there is now a hole in a loving family that will always be there. Our prayers and thoughts are with them.

Does it help to remember that the very problem of over-population is because so many children have survived that in other generations died in childbirth, infancy, and through disease and war? We look at scenes of conflict—terrible to watch and so difficult to resolve—but the world is actually comparatively peaceful in the historical perspective. Traffic fatalities are down by a huge factor in my lifetime. This is good news. But it does not somehow erase the tragedy of war, children starving, young people dying.

But we proclaim the Good News, capital G and N. And it is capitalized because it involves capital G God. The Good News is that God, the one who created, sustains and guides the universe, has come among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth: God in Christ. That is the Christian proclamation. The Good News is that this person lived and died, living only thirty-three years, but during the last three years performing wonders of healing, and teaching a Way of life so compelling and transforming that millions, indeed billions, of people in the two millennia since have embraced it—if not always fully living it out. The Good News includes his death at the hands of his human enemies, both political and religious, for his death on the cross somehow reconciled God and humanity. This is a profound mystery—that one person should be able to take on himself the sins of the world and offer them to God as a sacrifice, forgiving his enemies, renouncing violence, healing the breach. And it was followed by a yet greater wonder: that after three days his tomb was found empty. His followers reported his resurrected appearance: altered but recognizable. The Good News is the Easter acclamation: Christ is risen, Alleluia! The Good News was also not a forty day wonder but has been sustained for all of these centuries since—despite intense persecution at the beginning and despite all the changes of history and culture. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit who brings people to Christ, transforming their lives, enabling them to have faith and hope and love even in the midst of tragedy and suffering. And the word and example of these people—the early followers as well as those in this day and age—is what spreads the Good News. This is the Good News of God in Christ we promise to proclaim as well through our lives when we make or renew the Baptismal Covenant.

In addition to proclaiming God in Christ I would like us to also consider the Good News as **Christ in us and us in Christ**. St Paul in his writings often speaks of being “in Christ” (*en Christo*); some 49 times in the known letters. This is the news that somehow—through the Holy Spirit—we are united to God in Christ; we participate in divinity just as God participates in humanity: through Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit of love.

This is another profound truth: we are all connected and interrelated. We are in each other and all creation. We may think of ourselves as separate individuals but that is only and very partially true. We are connected to each other in ways science is able to study and measure. How people act and think in groups; how conversation and contact—physical and face to face—changes our bodies and minds. How we are embedded in and dependent on the natural world—and treat it as purely material at our peril and loss.

We know this when our hearts break for the loss of another. We know this when our heart leap at the sight of another’s joy. As Bono of U2 explains: “We are one/ But we’re not the same/ We get to carry each other/ Carry each other... One love/ One blood/ One life/ You got to do what you should/ One life/ With each other/ Sisters/ Brothers.”

As Christ carried us on the cross so he calls us to care for and carry each other: sisters and brothers. Beloved in Christ. Together in God, who unites the living and the dead, the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, and makes us one.

And that’s my final point. To proclaim the good news of God in Christ is not to say that only those who proclaim faith in Christ, who *feel* one with Christ, are saved, are good, are the elect of God. I don’t believe that. Our salvation does not—cannot—depend on our human powers of comprehension and religious belief. What about the many millions who grow up in other cultures, in which Christ’s word is strange or perceived as a foreign word? What about the children who find they cannot follow a teaching their parents hold when they see the world differently, see the problems, hypocrisies and failures of the church, when new teachings seem to better capture their experience of the world and of the divine?

Now I believe—I have found it to be true in my experience—that it is wonderful to be a follower of Jesus. But this is not because I get a ticket to heaven (reward) or escape eternal damnation (punishment). **It is because faith in God as shown in the human face of Christ reveals to me a God**

of love, forgiveness, power and joy. It is because following the Way of Jesus calls me to serve the world and make my own spirit stronger and brighter through prayer. It is because faith in God releases me from anxiety and fear.

If death has been overcome by Christ, well, where he goes so will I. If his Way teaches me not to be overly anxious about food and clothing—material things—but first seek the kingdom of God and these things will also be provided—well, then I can trust in a future that may not be overflowing with money but will be sufficient for my needs and those of my family.

Imagine a world where we all could trust in God's abundance and felt called to do to others as we would have done to us. Such a world, even with its many billions of people, would find a way to better share the abundance of this amazing planet; and so war and famine and migration would lose their main driving causes. Such a world would produce communities of profound care, where everybody's children are the concern of all and some do not live in poverty with little hope while others go from strength to strength. In such a world, hope would lift many young people who are now at risk of succumbing to despair and the careless pursuit of risky pleasures. Such a world would not be driven by the will to power, tribalism and violence: the world of empire Jesus took to the cross. Such a world is moving toward the kingdom of heaven—which even now is seeded within you.

Such a world will not somehow be free of suffering and death. After all, Jesus suffered and died. We all have our cross to bear. Life does not become miraculously easier because we follow the Way of Jesus. But the experience of generations of Christians is that the Way does lead to acceptance of suffering and lasting joy. It allows us to share the meaning and purpose we have found with others. It leads to a better world and better selves. This is what it means to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. I pray that my children and yours will find their own way to the Way of Jesus of Nazareth. But, reflecting on my own experience growing up in the church and then wandering in the wilderness of philosophical skepticism as a young adult—well, it may take some turns and the touch of God's hand on the heart. But keep the faith. As Julian of Norwich, that great medieval mystic and saint, once wrote: all will be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

That's the Good News.

Amen.

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