

Proper 14 Year C: 11 & 12 August 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY 13323
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“We are God’s sacramental presence in the world. As such, let us go forth empowered by grace to transform the bleakness that pervades our time into hopefulness and love.”

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16
Luke 12: 32-40
Psalm 50: 1-8, 23-24

We live in interesting times. It appears we are at an age where social equality is more in reach than at any other time in our nation’s history. Many point to the various opportunities presenting society for advancement and look to economic indicators to verify unprecedented financial growth for affirmation. This is possibly the most educated era the world has yet seen. Advancements in science and philosophy are unrivaled in history. Alas, all this may be true to some degree or other, but if you listen to the news or read any credible publication you might take notice that things are not as they first seem; that something lies beneath the surface of society that is insidious and lulls us into a false sense of surety that all is well.

Over the past few weeks, our news cycle has been inundated with rhetoric from the highest offices in our land that is inflammatory and degrading. Acts of violence have been exercised seemingly at random where hundreds of individuals have lost their lives. Others have experienced the emotional torture of a family being separated according to someone else’s policy. The inscription on our Statue of Liberty that says: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door! “. . . these words have been neutered and rendered impotent. All these occurrences recently led the Washington National Cathedral’s ministerial leadership to issue a pastoral letter to the nation

asking “Where is our decency?” And it has resonated such that other dioceses and mainline denominations have begun to speak out about these “interesting times.”

The people to whom Isaiah speaks in today’s lesson were also living in interesting times. They were prosperous, they had political acumen and felt secure in their treaties with foreign neighbors. They had trade pacts, defense agreements, they had cultural exchange. But they also had collective amnesia.

They had forgotten that they were once an oppressed people whom God had liberated. They had forgotten they were once foreigners in a strange land. They had forgotten who they were and to whom they belonged: the chosen, the beloved of God. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, contrary to popular belief, was the neglect of the foreigner and the stranger; the indifference shown towards the downtrodden, the indulgence of passion and pleasure regardless of consequence. Collective amnesia ran amuck.

No amount of ritual piety or sacrificial offering is going to cure this amnesia. No amount of atoning is going to cleanse the sin. It will not matter how many times you go to temple, how many psalms and hymns you sing. For God has seen what lies in their heart. Hearts, which had turned to false gods, false promises, and acculturation. The people of God had forgotten to seek justice for all, to defend the orphan, and protect the widow. They had forgotten that to be liberated from oppression meant that they were now align with God in seeking justice and righteousness for other oppressed people. Instead, they fostered oppression rather than work to liberate others in the name of YHWH.

Isaiah is that voice crying in the wilderness calling people to repentance so as to avoid the calamity which befalls all those who break covenant with God. His words are a clarion call to awaken from forgetfulness and to walk in the ways of YHWH once more. For all the prosperity of their time, the people to whom Isaiah speaks have forgotten their history and the lessons it teaches, for those who forget are doomed to repeat that history.

We too live with collective amnesia. In the wake of the recent shootings that have plagued our nation, I often hear good people say that “we are better than this.” And I ask myself: Are we? Really? We seem to have forgotten that as a nation, we were born out of violence. The Doctrine of Discovery, fostered by European explorers and sanctioned by the

Church, justified colonialism; wrapped it in the mantle of Christian faith, and utilized it as the source for sanctioning the eradication of native peoples who lived upon the various lands these explorers “discovered.” These Western powers sought to “civilize” indigenous folk and make them a proper Christian people. They forcibly brought other people from faraway lands that had already been colonized to be a work force in the other newly settled lands, rendering these individuals nothing more than chattel. As a nation, we were born from the violence of genocide and slavery. We were born from the violence of a war of independence and a terrible war amongst ourselves over ideology and principle. Are we truly better than the violence of our day?

Isaiah writes “...even though you make many prayers [says the Lord], I will not listen; [for] your hands are full of blood.” We are born out of violence and should not be surprised of these dire times. In spite of unmeasured prosperity for some, matters are bleak for many of our neighbors who, as individuals due to the color of their skin, their gender identity, orientation, ethnicity, or faith practice are being dehumanized through vial language that incites fear which then fosters violence. But hope remains. It remains for me in the love of Christ Jesus for all those who experience oppression – for in Christ there is no divisions. But before we can embrace Christ, as Jesus embraces us, we must address our collective amnesia and the systemic injustice that permeates our nation and how it insidiously lurks beneath the surface of life and continues to feed our fears.

You may have noticed that I did not refer to these times as dark. They are bleak and they dire, but they are not dark. That was intentional. You see, I have often wondered why dark or darkness is always associated with something to fear, to be afraid of. Evil things are depicted as happening in the dark, and only the light of day can chase the fearful shadows away. Why is dark synonymous with something bad or negative while light is associated with goodness and purity? Why? Why, in television and cinema Westerns of the 1950-70s did the good guys ride white horses and wear white hats while the bad guys road dark horses and wore black hats? This seemingly innocuous portrayal masks a more sinister attitude that permeates our current society. You see, if your skin is white, you are understood as good while if your skin is dark or anything other than white, you are someone to fear, someone bad to avoid or eradicate. This is

what systemic racism looks like and what folks whose skin is brown, red, yellow or everything in-between live with on a daily basis, and why racial reconciliation is difficult, especially when its impetus is led by white people. We, indeed, suffer from collective amnesia, yet, as a person of faith, I believe hope remains.

I see that hope in all of us gather here today; gathered for the sacrament of Word and Table, gathered as the Body of Christ and participants in God's covenant. Jesus, as God's sacrament in the world, has been transformed into a glorified state, whose physical presence is now mediated through our gathered presence. We are a sacramental presence; we incarnate the Living Christ and that is true treasure. That is what gives me hope. For we who partake of the sacrament of word, bread, and wine are the sacrament of God's presence in the world. We, who have been freed from the bondage of sin and death through Christ's passion, who are infused with grace in the receiving of the Eucharist, we are now aligned with God's continued work to liberate the oppressed, to stand-up for justice, to be the voice of the downtrodden. That is the hope I see as I look out over the gather church.

We are God's sacramental presence in the world. As such, let us go forth empowered by grace to transform the bleakness that pervades our time into hopefulness and love. Let us hear the clarion call of Isaiah and awaken from our amnesia so that we can be instruments of such grace where decency prevails and God's justice and mercy reign.