

April 22, 2019
New Song Episcopal Church
Matthew Helmke
(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Why Preach?

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching...”

Okay, that’s pretty intense. There aren’t many things in this world that any of us would be willing to stand toe to toe with the authorities over. Civil rights, maybe. Personal liberties, perhaps. But an idea? A philosophy? A religious teaching?

Something is going on here, and it isn’t business as usual.

“We must obey God rather than any human authority...”

Wow, over the centuries these words have been spoken by people following a notion of God that I want nothing to do with, and their actions have been anything but Godly or God-like in doing so. Oppression. Hatred. Slander. Just general everyday mean-ness and bigotry. Genocide.

What made the people in today’s readings different than all the others? What makes the message of the apostles different?

Two words: repentance and forgiveness. Nothing could be more stark a contrast in a hateful and cruel world.

Humanity wants vengeance. We want to see wrong not only brought down, but

suffer the indignities it has caused others to suffer. “How long, O Lord?” is often not only a cry for deliverance and justice but also a cry for wrath to be meted out upon the deposed wrathful.

In the words of the apostles, Jesus is lifted up that he might give repentance and forgiveness. This is the one who healed the sick, raised the dead, and delivered those oppressed by demons. He is also the one who said, at the ultimate pinnacle of his passion, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The message is “grace to you and peace, from the one who was, is, and is to come.”

The message is “to him who loves us and freed us from our sins...be glory and dominion forever and ever.”

To the apostles, it seems that when they saw Jesus, when they saw the beauty of one so pure who was also so mistreated, their response was “How can we but weep?” Not out of guilt. Not out of shame. Out of a sudden and real epiphany of true beauty and greatness. The perfect pearl for which a person would sell everything. Every eye will see him...and on his account...even those who pierced him...will wail... (paraphrased slightly to change the order to make the English phrasing smoother).

I grew up in the church. I was ordained for 16 years. I have only caught fleeting glimpses of beauty and power that pure. I’m saying this not to criticize, but to magnify

just how unique this Jesus is. I pray to see more of that beauty and power and I pray for others to see that grace and majesty through me (but never ascribed TO me because like everyone here, I also know how I compare on my own merits).

I want to be like Jesus, walking into a room of people who once followed but who are currently hiding away in fear and say, "Peace be with you." I want to see the fear fall away and when the celebration begins, I want to again say, "Peace be with you."

I want to give grace to Thomas in his doubts, grace enough to reach out and invite him to touch the scars and so believe. That is grace I don't naturally have.

With the apostles, I want Jesus to breathe life into me, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It was the breath of God in Genesis that initially animated a person created out of clay. May the breath of God in Jesus animate each of us in a new way so that as new creations we continually better represent that holy acceptance that is so overwhelmingly powerful that knees tremble and bow in repentance.

Jesus did many other things that are not written, but these things are written so that YOU and I may believe, and by believing have life in his name.

Amen.

The First Lesson: Acts 5:27-32

When the temple police had brought the apostles, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have

filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

The New Testament: Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The Gospel: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.