

LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

15th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18B)

September 5, 2021 — Richard L. Ullman

Our Rector is on sabbatical. Associate Rector Sarah is on Maternity Leave. Assisting Priest Joe is enjoying Labor Day Weekend away. So here I am, up from the pew box where I sit with Margaret when we're in town.

Meanwhile, momentous things have been happening in God's world. My heart fills with ever so tentative, prayerful song:

Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.

Perhaps something like this prayer has risen in your hearts as well. The prompts are many. Our nation's withdrawal from the War in Afghanistan is the most obvious. But there are many more. The ongoing pandemic, with its ongoing warfare how to address it in school, workplace, commerce, and transportation. War-like natural events: drought, wildfires, storms, floods. Our nation's continuing deep division on every fault line: political, economic, cultural, racial, religious—you name it, we're divided.

"Let there be peace on earth," indeed!

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To begin with the personal, I was born in the fall of 1939. Hitler's Germany invaded Poland that fall, and World War 2 was underway. I did all those marvelous things babies, toddlers, and preschoolers do that as that war waged on. The Korean War overshadowed my high school days. The Vietnam War and America's domestic war over Civil Rights overshadowed my years in college, seminary, and early ministry. Through it all, the Cold War. Then a glimmer of peace when the Berlin Wall came a-tumblin' down. Yet soon thereafter, military engagement in Bosnia (our son-in-law flew deadly missions there). Then—with continuing family involvement—the brief Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait. A fairly quiet decade brought us to 2001: 9-11, Al-Qaeda and war in Afghanistan and more war in Iraq. (Again, we had family involvement.)

"Let there be peace on earth," indeed!

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This is the context in which the Church in her lectionary sets God's word before us this morning:

⁴ Say to all those of faint heart:

"Take courage! Do not be afraid!

Look, YHWH is coming,

vindication is coming,

the recompense of God—

God is coming to save you!"

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,

the ears of the deaf will be unsealed.

⁶ Then those who cannot walk will leap like deer
and the tongues of those who cannot speak will sing for joy.
Waters will break forth in the wilderness,
and there will be streams in the desert.
⁷ The scorched earth will become a lake;
the parched land, springs of water.

Don't we all need to hear that? Surely I do! I need courage. I need hope.

As do women and girls in Afghanistan and all who love them.

As do those whose homes once stood in forests now consumed by wildfire.

As do families and friends mourning the latest wanton gun slaying in Philadelphia.

As do our neighbors whose homes and cars and businesses were flooded just days ago.

As do—well: as do we all!

The courage Isaiah this morning proclaims, the courage and the hope, is rooted in trust that “God is coming to save you”. But be not naïve about *how* God is coming to save us.

“God is coming to save you,” proclaims Isaiah. But God’s salvation didn’t come in a clap of thunder immediately upon the prophet’s proclamation. Salvation came later, and slowly, through the thoughtful, compassionate operation of a king not of Isaiah’s party or people or nation. Salvation came from where it was not expected.

The witness of Scripture is always thus. In the Bible, salvation never arrives in accordance with human expectation, your expectation and mine. It always comes slant. “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” wrote Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

So this morning’s Gospel portion: Jesus heads out from home territory, from Genesserat (the Sea of Galilee) into the territory of Tyre and Sidon. That’s in southern Lebanon, on the Mediterranean coast—about 65 miles, about 20 hours by foot from where Jesus was staying. There, out on the seacoast, Jesus is called upon to minister healing to an intrusive outsider.

As I read the story, it all snuck up on Jesus’s ever so human blind side. Salvation came far from home—in Lebanon, where for a moment even Jesus didn’t expect it. Moreover, it came due to the persistence of a passionate, pushy foreign woman, begging for the sake of her child. Which raises questions in my heart and mind: if I’m yearning for salvation in these days of devastation, shouldn’t I be listening for some persistent, pushy person, pleading for the health of stricken children? And, should I be so privileged that I hear her pleading, what then?

Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.

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We heard from the Letter of James last week. We are fortunate to hear more from him this morning. James is quite on point:

You're acting rightly... if you fulfill the royal law of the scriptures:
"Love... your neighbor... as yourself."

My sisters and brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it?
Such faith has no power to save.

There's that word again: to save. Salvation.

My sisters and brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it?
Such faith has no power to save.

Listen, then, once more to Isaiah:

Say to all those of faint heart:
"Take courage! Do not be afraid!
Look, YHWH is coming,
vindication is coming,
the recompense of God—
God is coming to save you!"

Now, ever so patiently, listen for that song welling, however faintly, in your heart. Listen and, to honor Isaiah's prophecy, act upon it:

Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.

In the Name of God:
Father, Son, Spirit.
Amen.