

Easter 7 C 2016

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17:20-26

Do you remember
The Era of Good Feelings?

Or rather,
Do you remember
That there was an Era of Good Feelings?
No one here actually remembers it, of course,
That brief time two hundred years ago
When this country basked in a sense of unity of purpose,
A desire to overcome partisan divisions.
A time of conviviality and conversation.
Or so they described it at the time.

Was it for real?
Opinion is divided at best.
But what was real was the vision,
An ideal of shared purpose and goodwill.

That era is long gone,
Drowned in rancor and uncertainty.
We might even want to call our own time
The Era of Hard Feelings.

It is certainly true that there have been other times
That were just as bad.
But this is our bad time.
We move through a sludge
Of hostility, fear, and helplessness,
And there is no one offering hope or change.

Have we been left comfortless?
Is there any promise now that will come true for us?

Can we trust Jesus,
Who says
That when he goes away,
He will send another to be our guide and friend?

This is the in-between time,

When Jesus is gone into heaven
And the Holy Spirit is not yet here.

And it feels like it.

In this era of hard feelings,
How do we find the Holy Spirit?
The Holy Spirit who, in truth,
Is already not yet and always here?

The Holy Spirit has always been here,
Breathing over the waters of chaos
At the moment of creation,
Speaking through the prophets,
Resting upon God's Holy One
And filling him up with love,
And now, soon,
Returning to bring us comfort
And light a new fire within us.

Soon.
And none too soon.

This is a moment for waiting.
And while we are waiting
For the unknown, familiar,
Mysterious and friendly presence
Of the one who is already here,
Perhaps we could wonder:

How will the Holy Spirit inspire us this time?
How will the Holy Spirit invite us,
Nudge us, toss us
Into this Era of Hard Feelings,
To help make a new way known?

How will the Holy Spirit help us
To stand up for our Muslim sisters and brothers
Who are threatened and vilified,
Turned into scapegoats,
Prevented from building new houses of prayer?

How will the Holy Spirit help us
To address the killing
Of unarmed black men and children?

How will the Holy Spirit help us
To let go our own fear and prejudice,
So that we can hear and understand,
And respond with some measure of empathy
To the alienation and anger
That drive our fellow citizens
To follow a dangerous demagogue?

How will the Holy Spirit inspire us
To seek creative ways
To end the catastrophe of homelessness
In our own city?

How will the Holy Spirit keep hope alive within us?

Hope, like love,
Is an act of faith.
Feeling has little to do with it.

When the Holy Spirit comes,
Will she show us
How to act in hope?

Will she show us how to act
With the courage and integrity
Of Paul and Silas,
Bound in jail?

Will the Holy Spirit lead us on a journey
That begins from this story,
And brings us right up to our own troubled time?

Sit with this story for a minute,
The story of Paul and Silas,
Bound in jail.
We could pull it apart,
Talk about slavery in the ancient world,
Divination, false accusations.

Or, we could listen for the way it has echoed
Down through the ages,
Sounding a note of courage for those in need,
Those oppressed by injustice or indifference,
Those who struggle for freedom.

We could hear this story

As it came to life,
Almost a hundred years ago,
in the old folk song:
Paul and Silas bound in jail
Got no money for to go their bail,
Keep your eyes on the prize,
Hold on.

Keep your eyes on the prize,
Hold on.

At first neither the story
Nor the song that sprang from it
May seem to be for us.
Slave girls and divination
And earthquakes shaking off the prisoners' shackles
Are not the stuff of our lives.
But the wisdom running under the story,
And flowing forth in the song,
A wisdom that sustained the struggle for freedom and justice
That was the civil rights movement,
That wisdom
Is just what we need.

This is the wisdom of the story
And the song that sprang from it:
God's will is for freedom.
Freedom from exploitation.
Freedom from false accusations.
Freedom from anything that keeps us chained.

The people who heard the story
And found its deeper wisdom
Knew that it was a story of freedom,
And also a story of hope.

God will not leave anyone in chains forever.
Maybe longer than we want.
But even if the promise of God seems slow,
Says the prophet,
Wait for it.
It will surely come.

Keep your eyes on the prize.
Hold on.

That's the message of this in-between time.
Until the promise comes, hold on.

But we can't get too comfortable here,
Just holding on.

Because the Holy Spirit,
Who is coming,
Is already here.

Today it is already time
To look for the new thing,
To reach out our hands for the water of life,
To take hold of the tree of life that is our right.

We think of the tree of life as a vision
And a gift,
But today we are told,
It's our right.

So –
Here's a little tidbit that is too good to pass up,
A piece of trivia
That turns out to be anything but trivial.
The song Eyes on the Prize,
Which has its roots in our first lesson,
First became known when it was collected
From an old woman in the rural south
And included in a book of spirituals
With a title taken from our second lesson:
Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?

Where the lectionary and the traditions
Of the vanishing past meet,
We can pause, and smile,
And maybe discover a deeper meaning
Than we would have without listening
To the voices of the those who are seldom heard.

Everyone has a right to the tree of life.
Everyone can drink from the water.
But we have to hold on,
Endure to the end of the vision.

Wonder about these things together.
Hold the vision,

And see how it lives in our mission.
See how our mission wants to become real in the world.
Wonder about these things together,
While I wander away for a while.

I am setting off on a sabbatical journey
In which I place great hopes –
Though I trust that my adventures will be less dramatic
Than those in the Book of Acts.
I especially hope and expect to avoid the shipwreck.

Some of you will be journeying too;
You have told me of great plans for travels and times away.

But those who remain are on an adventure too.
Wherever the Holy Spirit turns up,
Things are bound to happen.

We need the Holy Spirit now more than ever –
And that is always the case.
This is just our time to need her.

We need her to bring us comfort
In a dark and troubling time –
An era of hard feelings.

We need her to bring us hope
In a time
When we cannot imagine what will happen.

We need her to bring us to the water
And to shelter us under the tree,
And we need her open our eyes
To recognize those others who come to the water
And make them welcome.

Wait for her,
Watch for her.
Expect the unexpected.
And when it comes, embrace it.

When I come back,
Tell me your stories
Of how the Holy Spirit
Came down right into your midst,
Caught your hair on fire,

And gave you new words,
New ways to go,
New ways to act.
Expect the unexpected,
And when it comes, embrace it.