

Proper 17 A 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

I come to you today with good news.

I promise.

It's just that sometimes

The good news is slow to appear.

A lot of the time,

What we see first, looks like loss.

This is one of those times.

Against our will,

And without too much warning,

We have lost the lives we used to count on.

The pandemic leaves us isolated,
scrambling to adjust,

Living with varying degrees of risk,

No matter what our tolerance for risk.

Even those of us who still have secure jobs,

Or a steady source of income,

And plenty of food, and safe homes,

Live in a world that has become perilous.

The long-delayed reckoning

With the systemic racism that lies at our roots,

The great sin woven into our fabric as a nation,

Means a moment of truth that could bring change –

or could unravel yet again.

Our hyper-partisan and vicious political climate

Leaves many of us wondering

How we could ever again talk to our neighbors across the fence

Or gather at the family table,

When it seems that our differences are too fundamental

And our resentment too deep

To overcome.

Our planet surges with storms

And burns out of control.

We have no leaders

Inspiring us to persevere,
Inviting and cajoling us to change our ways
And start again.

We have lost the lives we used to count on.

Is this what Jesus was talking about
When he told us
That those who lose their life will find it?
When he tells us to pick up our cross, and follow –
Is he talking about the suffering that broods over every part of our lives?

Because we are all suffering.
Some of us are hiding from it,
And some of us are sinking under it.
Some of us are putting on a brave face and carrying on,
Some of us are reacting badly,
Harming ourselves or others.
Some are responding with genuine courage.
Some are breaking under the strain.
We are all suffering.

And we all might wonder,
Like the prophet Jeremiah,
Can we trust in the promises of God,
Or has the river of grace run dry?

Jeremiah, anguished, indignant,
Angry at abuse of power,
Fecklessness,
Persecution and betrayal,
Violence and upheaval,
Cried out against God,
You are to me like a deceitful brook,
Like waters that fail.

Have you been there at all,
In this year like no other?
Is the prophet's lament like your lament?

If so, take heart.

Lament is always part of the story of the people of God.
Crying out against circumstance,
Mourning what is lost,
Railing against God,

This lament is the language of the faithful
In all hard times.

And this lament is never the end of the story.
Even the cross is not the end of the story.
It is the beginning.

So when Jesus invites us to take up the cross,
We may be afraid,
We may be sorrowful,
But there is no need to despair.
The cross is a place of suffering, yes –
But we are already suffering.

And the suffering of the cross is not the point.
The suffering is real,
And inevitable, but incidental.

What is the cross, then?

The cross of Jesus,
The one in which we share,
Is the place of witness.
The cross is the place where truth is visible.
The cross is the place
Where holy, absolute, ultimate love
Fixes itself within the mess of our lives,
For good.

The cross we can take up,
A true fragment of the cross of Christ,
Is a place of witness,
And meaning.

The cross looks like our greatest prophet
Standing before a crowd,
Proclaiming a dream he would not live to see.
That was his witness,
His moment of truth made visible.

The cross looks like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission,
Fumbling and incomplete as it might be.
A process where those who have been wronged
Can lament the injustice and cruelty,
The harm they have suffered,
Where they can speak into a respectful, listening silence

And hope, maybe even trust,
Their words have found a mark.

What does the cross look like now,
In this moment,
When we pick it up and follow Jesus?

How can we be a people of witness
A people who hold up the cross
As a sign, not of suffering,
But of the presence of God among us?

I can think of three ways to start.
Hope,
Love,
Faith.
They are hard.
We may fall short.
But remember, we are called
To be faithful, not perfect,
To turn, and turn, and turn again,
Whenever we fall short.

Wherever we have been before,
Whatever we have done,
This is a new moment.
This is a moment when we can bear witness.
When we can show that the promises of God never fail.
When we pick up the cross,
Which is the sign of love.

How do we do that?

Hope.
We maintain the disciplines that keep hope alive.
We keep reading scripture,
Where the story of hope shines out of darkness,
Over and over.
We engage in meaningful conversation,
Where we let ourselves show weakness and wounds,
Where we wonder together,
Share silence together.
We keep investing in community,
Even when we want to hide under the covers.
We enjoy acts of creative imagination,
Where new possibilities might surprise us.

These are some of the ways
We keep open and ready the space within ourselves
Where the holy can enter as hope.

Hope is one way.
And then there is love.

We can believe in the vision of Beloved Community.
Even if we are not ready to love our enemies,
We can start here:
We can believe,
Or at least assent to the proposition,
That God loves everyone,
Including those we cannot or will not love.
We can believe
That in God,
We are all one.
All of us are one in the community of love
Created by God's embrace.
All of us.
Peaceful protestors and violent offenders.
Vicious liars and feeble champions of truth.
All of us.

We may not be ready
To live into the vision of community
Offered to those early Christians in Rome:
Live in harmony,
Peaceably with all.
Do not claim –
This one is hard for some of us –
To be wiser than you are.
We may not be ready to live into this vision,
But we can hold it before our eyes,
Believing that it offers a clear and better way,
The way of true beloved community.

Love is another way to carry the cross.

And then there is faith.
For some among us,
Faith is the easiest way to grasp.
For others of us,
It is the most elusive.

Faith is trust,

Faith is relationship.
Faith is solid ground on which to stand.
Faith, when it is genuine, enlivens not only our own lives,
But the wellbeing of our neighbors
And the flourishing of all creation.
Faith –
This is most important now –
Faith thrives in community
More than in isolation.
If you feel no solid ground under your feet,
Trust that others can maintain that ground.
If you sense no holy hidden God
On the other side of a relationship,
Know that others can hold the slender thread
That guides the way.

Faith is a way of the cross,
A witness,
A beacon through the darkness.

Faith, hope, love.

These are ways of the cross.

The cross is the beginning of our story.
This is good news.