

6 Epiphany C 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

The tree of life is growing here.

That's the vision given to us,
Here at St. Andrew's,
A vision
To guide and inspire us
As we live into our call.

For years now we have proclaimed it.
For years we have given it exuberant expression
In the tree outside our door.
And for years,
We have considered –
What does it take to make the tree thrive?

We have discovered, over the years,
All sorts of ways of describing
What it takes to make the tree thrive.

Invitation, welcome, acceptance.
Fellowship, formation, nurture.
Time, talent, treasure.

All these things.
And most of all, this:

Roots that go down to the water of life.
That's the beautiful wisdom
Of the psalm we sang just now:
Trees planted by streams of water
Have leaves that do not wither.
The tree of life flourishes
When it taps into the source of life,
The goodness and mercy,
The sheer beauty at the heart of all that is.
That is blessing, free and freely offered,
To everyone, everywhere, always.

Without the blessing,

The overflowing abundance freely given,
the tree withers.
That's the curse,
And there is no avoiding it.

A curse, in scripture, in legend,
Through all the generations of human history
Until very recently,
is more than a word you would rather not hear me say
from the pulpit,
or anywhere, for that matter.
The curse the prophet calls down,
The woes that Jesus proclaims,
Are words of power.
They become real as they are spoken,
Or they unfold over time.
They can be vindictive,
They can be straightforward expression of consequences.
But no matter what, curses are real.
Those who heard the prophets curse,
Those who heard Jesus call down woe,
Knew they were in the presence of something real.

We think of curses as mere words,
Maybe rude, maybe unpleasant,
But only as effectual as we allow.
If we hear the words of scripture this way,
We miss the power,
And fail to see the warning or the gift.

And, we think we can slide over those words of woe,
And go on, or turn back,
To the blessings.
And maybe there are times
When that would do us no harm.

But these are not usual times.
And when I first started looking
At the lessons for today,
All I could see was the curse with which we begin.

A curse on those who trust in their own strength,
Their own cleverness,
Their own connections.
A curse on those who live
As if there were nothing more,

No beyond,
No God.

And I tried to take it seriously.
To ask myself,
What can we learn,
How can we grow,
If we take to heart the images we're offered
Today in scripture,
Of blessing and curse?

And I thought,
It's been hard not to curse –
To use our pale version of an ancient word of power –
Hard not to curse at the state of the world.
Wherever you place yourself
On the continuum of responses
To the events of the past week –
And I have to keep believing that there is a continuum,
Rather than two edges of a huge chasm –
Wherever you place yourself,
It is unlikely that you find yourself applauding
The turn, the many turns of events
That bring us to this moment.

Is it an emergency?
Where do we go from here?
What should happen now?

These are questions that must be settled elsewhere,
If they can be settled.

The question for us is bigger,
And lasts longer,
And can't be settled, once for all.
This question:
How do we,
As people of faith,
Respond to these unsettled times?

Do these lessons offer us anything?

I believe they do.

They offer back to us the vision
Of who we can be.

And they offer us a warning
Of what we could become,
If we lost the vision,
Turned aside from the way,
Forgot to give thanks,
To open our hearts,
To practice hope.

Who are we called to be,
Now that, as the prophet says,
The heat has come,
And the day of drought?

Who are we called to be,
When, as Jesus says,
The days of weeping come?

How do we hold on to blessing,
And turn aside the curse?

The people of God,
Since the beginning,
Have been those who choose.
Who choose the way of blessing.

God spoke through Moses
To the children of Israel in the wilderness,
Setting before them blessing and curse,
Life and death.
And God urged them,
Choose life.

God spoke through the prophets
To the people of Jerusalem,
Urging them to continue in the way of righteousness:
Righteousness, which means,
Staying in tune with the vision of God:
Daily, hourly,
Making choices that promote peace, justice,
The renewal and wellbeing of all.

Jesus spoke to the people
As he walked among them,
Healing and teaching,
Inviting them to cast their nets into deeper water,

Teasing them with parables,
Revealing the truth at the heart of things.

Inviting them to follow;
Sending them out to share the good news.

The people of God are always choosing.
Choosing to follow.
Choosing to bear witness.
Choosing blessing,
Even when it seems that all is curse.

That's the paradox at the heart of Jesus's words.
What we might see as curse,
If we could only see with our human eyes,
Contains within it
The seeds of blessing.

Blessed are you poor.
Blessed are you who weep.
Blessed are you who are hungry.

Right now,
You belong to God's commonwealth
Where love and justice prevail.
Right now.
Rejoice and be glad.

If this is the blessing,
Then we are now the ones to claim it.

Blessed are you
Whose world is going up in flames.
You can choose the small and simple ways
To heal and renew the earth,
And reach for the bigger, harder to ways
That will have to come.

Blessed are you whose country is in peril.
You can choose hope.

Blessed are you whose common life
Has become bitter.
You can choose to trust,
To listen, to find unexpected neighbors
Where before there were strangers.

These actions are real, and they matter.
But for us as Christians,
they are not the deepest part of the story.

We are called to trust in a future we cannot see.
Only then will we live in the blessing.

If our roots go down to the water of life,
Past the real and terrible events of now,
Then they touch the always of eternity
Where all is well.

If we lose this truth,
And see only what is in front of our faces,
Then we will wither and die.
There will be no hope.

But the truth will sustain us.
There is still and always One
Who renews and inspires all things.
That is the blessing.
No curse can overcome this blessing.

If we tap into it,
We cannot fail.

And if the tree flourishes here,
And in all places
Where the people of God hold on to hope,
Then we will have been faithful to our call,
To tell the news and share the blessing.

The tree of life is growing here,
I believe.
It will not fail when drought comes.

Rejoice and be glad.