

**Lent III March 8, 2015**

**Exodus 20:1-17**

**Psalms 19**

**1Corinthians 1:18-25**

**John 2:13-22**

## **Reviving the Soul**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA*

*Let us pray: God of all times and of all places... break into our ordinary lives. Stir us, unsettle us, challenge us.... deepen our hunger for you and your justice that we may be your instruments of healing and reconciliation in the world. Amen.*

In his book, *The Rebirthing of God*, John Philip Newell shares a dream he once had. In the dream John was presiding at a communion table at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. He describes his dream like this:

*The bread and wine were already on the altar. The prayers had been said and I was about to share the gifts with the people. But standing at opposite corners of the altar were two groups. One consisted of members of Amnesty International, passionate about their work for human rights. The other was made up of singers, chanting the most beautiful Gregorian plainsong. Members of each group were holding one of the corners of the altar cloth [and] they were pulling [the cloth] in opposite directions. The tension was so great that it seemed as if the chalice were going to topple over. I could not continue with the celebration of communion.<sup>1</sup>*

In his reflection on the dream Newell said that it spoke to him about the “need to reconcile apparent opposites, in this case the tension between action and contemplation, before we can experience oneness.”<sup>2</sup> The two dynamics... on the one side... to receive God’s peace and comfort are present. ... on the other... the call to live into the sacrifice of loving service for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus. God’s peace and comfort, the call to live into the challenges of living the Gospel in the world, are present even as we worship here today.

The most precious moment for me in worship is when I feel the warmth of the wine tingling down my throat... and the substance of the bread making its way inside... an experience of Christ in me, no longer outside, but the love of God known in the sacrament of communion. From the center of my physical being I feel Christ becoming one with me and I with him. Receiving communion is more than simply getting filled up with God’s goodness and love. We are to be nourished, in the whole of our being, that we may go out into the world... to seek God’s justice, and share God’s love in our word and deed. We are to be both comforted and challenged and to live into the holy tension of that dynamic.

A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of society in which it is being proclaimed --- what gospel is that?

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<sup>1</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, Skylight Paths Pub., Woodstock, VT, 2014, pg. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg. 94.

The living Gospel, the Good News, is both comforting and unsettling. When its power is really received, when it gets under the skin and stirs us to action and boldness... it awakens us to see with new eyes and urges us to live beyond our meekness... The Gospel calls us to engage and to follow Christ whose being, and whose whole message, is foolishness to those who adhere to worldly conventions of wisdom. Paul wrote in his message to the Corinthians "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." The message of the Gospel flips the tables of our comfort and complacency.

In our lessons today we have the commandments given to Moses, laws to live by that are not so much about our personal happiness but about walking in right paths so that our neighbors and our communities may not be disrupted by hurtful behavior. To steal, to covet, to disregard the care of our parents and elders, is not simply a personal transgression against God... such sins, such transgressions, violate the integrity of our tribe, our community, our family. When God is viewed as residing only in temple, or a church, only in a place outside of ourselves the old ways of keeping God at a distance remain. We are challenged to experience the temple in grander and more intimate ways. Christ is here, where we worship in beauty. But God does not dwell only in this house. God's law, peace, and justice... is everywhere.

In our lesson from John, we have the story of Jesus in the temple occurring in chapter 2, at the beginning of his ministry, following on the heels of his first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. In the other three gospels, the story of Jesus turning over the table of the moneychangers occurs towards the end of his activities in Jerusalem, placed in such a way that his actions in the temple are added fuel for his arrest. The activities of the moneychangers actually served an important function as Roman money, Caesar's coins, the currency of the empire... was not to be used for the holy purposes of buying animals for sacrifice. The moneychangers functioned like a currency exchange in an airport. Jesus' anger was about the commerce and inordinate profit making that was occurring as a stumbling block to those who sought to worship in the traditions within which they were taught. That system was to change. The "holy," the temple, would soon move out of a building.... and the new king, the anointed one, the Christ, would suffer a painful and humiliating death. The temple that was Christ would be torn down.... but is death was not to be the end of the story. The life that death could not contain was not to be held in any tomb, or any one place of worship. In the resurrection God, in Christ, was truly unleashed in the world.

This week we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the march in Selma. The calling of justice, the calling of the gospel beckoned freedom fighters from across the country. Brutality, blood and death were present in the confrontation between the Gospel and oppressive powers that sought to keep an evil status quo. The Church, the preached Gospel, the gathering of God's people was present in the courage and commitment of Dr. King and all the others who braved a movement towards freedom... a movement into which we are still called to participate today... the call to live the Gospel boldly wherever we are.

The psalmist talks also about the law of the Lord... God's law is "perfect" for it revives the soul:

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.*

*...Their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world...*

*... The law of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul...*

*...the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent*

*...Let the words of our mouths and meditations of our hearts be  
acceptable in your sight, o lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

May we receive the sacrament of life with holiness and wonder... and then go forth to live boldly  
as Christ would have us do.

*Amen...*