

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
The 4th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A June 25, 2023
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This week's readings had some of my colleagues scrambling to find something in the psalms or perhaps the collect of the day to preach on. These are difficult and harsh readings. Abraham and Sarah kept people in slavery and Sarah had Hagar and her son by Abraham turned out into the desert to die. And in the gospel this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that he has come not to bring peace, but a sword. Difficult to hear; but if we are to follow Jesus, we cannot make peace with the status quo. Instead, we must work to bring God's vision of peace more and more into the world. This will not be a popular stance and will set family members against family members. Disciples will meet resistance and even persecution for following Jesus' gospel of truth and inclusive love.

There are many today who would cover up the truth of our history. Policies against “wokeness in education” have become a trend across the nation. High school AP classes in African American studies are banned in some states, and many books considered 'controversial' have been removed from the shelves. Books about racism, sexuality, gender, history or any number of topics have been banned from libraries in schools, communities, and prisons. Teachers and librarians are in danger of being arrested if they have books on a number of taboo issues -determined not by educators, but by politicians; including those about non-Christian faiths, certain biographies and memoirs, and books with primary characters who are people of color. In some states, the history taught in schools has become sanitized of anything that would make those in the dominate culture distressed. School Board elections across the country have become battle grounds for those who want parents to be able to opt-out of any lesson they feel uncomfortable or awkward about being taught to their children. Even in Connecticut, a history teacher told me that she has to be careful about what she includes in her lesson plans.

Revisionists would have us believe that slavery was not the reason for the civil war, and those who were enslaved are recast as those who were content with their lot in life. They deny that native Americans were massacred, re-located to uninhabitable areas, or enslaved. There are those who deny that the holocaust ever happened. Paul Appelbaum, former head of the American Psychiatric Association says that denial is the deliberate, often psychologically motivated, neglect of information that would be too upsetting or anxiety producing to be allowed into one's belief system. Scientific findings on climate change, medicine, and even whether the earth is round or flat are being called into question. Telling the truth has become a dangerous business.

And yet, Jesus says to us, "nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." Disciples are to proclaim the truth of the gospel-no matter how people might receive it and no matter how they might respond when they do hear it. Jesus' good news is subversive. It challenges the status quo and is seen as a threat to those in power.

And this is why Jesus said, "Don't be afraid." "Don't be afraid," he said a second time. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father." Don't be afraid. How often that encouragement is found in Scripture. Angels, prophets, and our Savior continually remind us that we do not need to be afraid -for God sees

and hears. God knows. God sees every human misery and hears every cry. God saw the mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael and provided for them in the desert. And Ishmael grew to be the father of Islam.

God's eye is on the sparrow. When trouble surrounds us, we are not alone. God is with us. Always. As the old hymn goes: Why should I feel discouraged, Why should the shadows come, Why should my heart be lonely, And long for heav'n and home; When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is he; His eye is on the sparrow, And I know he watches me; His eye is on the sparrow, And I know he watches me.

This is not to say that disciples of Christ will not suffer or feel anxiety and pain. But we can rest in God as we work and wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. It is this faith that allows us to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel and in doing so, find it.

Theologian Bruce Epperly wrote that "dying to self, and losing your life, takes us beyond the anxieties of the moment to rest safely in God. What dies are the habits of individualism, greed, and self-interest. All these focus on the isolated self and its survival or way of life, and are constantly at risk from external forces. " "What dies," he writes, "is the sense of threat from others, who are seen as competitors and enemies." Epperly challenges us to let go of the safe, self-interested approaches to life and trust God's open-spirited path to the future. This is what will bring true peace. This is what can bring God's peace, that passes all understanding.

Let us pray. Almighty God, you rescued your people from slavery in Egypt, and throughout the ages you have never failed to hear the cries of the captives. Anoint us with your Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of your favor; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Prayer adapted from the Episcopal Church prayer for Juneteenth.)