

Sermon Notes from CMJ
22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 59:9-20; Psalm 13; Hebrews 5:11-6:12; Mark 10:46-52

Introduction. God did not create darkness; it was there in the beginning. The first action in creation is to bring the light. Ironically, we cannot fully appreciate or understand what light is without the existence of darkness. This should not entice us to become comfortable with darkness, for as Paul says, what fellowship has light with darkness? When we look at dark things it should prompt us to get closer to the light.

Common Theme. Each of our readings describes a different circumstance of being in a dark place. Sometimes the darkness is literal blindness, and in other cases it is circumstances in the world that seem dark and foreboding. The good news is that we are never left to remain in the dark forever. God is light and life, his presence is assured, and even the darkest night fades as dawn approaches. As John 1:5 says, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Job 42:1-6, 10-17. When God finally spoke to Job (chs. 38-42), he did not provide the explanation for Job's suffering. It does seem strange that the book concludes without answers to the questions it raised, and I suspect that this is the point. As we read Job's final words, we see him make an amazing confession and turn to repentance. Job has endured much without knowing why, yet he confidently states that God 'can do everything'. God can indeed do everything, including comforting and assuring Job in his distress. Repentance is not a negative word in the Scriptures. What exactly did Job have to repent of has been the subject of many sermons and commentaries. The reason for Job's crisis was the incident in heaven between the Lord and Satan, not some consequence invited by Job's actions. Job still had uttered words and held inappropriate attitudes that required repentance. Repentance is a gift, especially once the light of God comes to dispel the darkness and reveal the truth about ourselves. At the end, Job has come to realize the truth that God is for him and was never against him. Perhaps this understanding is actually the greatest of Job's blessings. During periods of suffering, we need to be encouraged and hold onto the faith that God remains for us. At the beginning of Job, we read that he was a blessed man. Now, at the end, he is even more blessed as God restores Job's fortunes. The issue of Job's fortunes also raises some theological questions. For example, how could Job's new children replace the ones he had lost? Does monetary compensation make up for personal suffering? We cannot make conclusions about these issues from the text itself. What we can conclude is that we have the assurance that God does pay attention to the suffering of humanity and that the Lord will not remain silent forever. He will speak, and we should listen.

Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22. This psalm has a title that attributes it to a particular time and place in the life of King David. Avimelech is the ruler before whom David feigns madness. Avimelech means 'My father is king', and so the name is perhaps not the name of a person but the title of the ruler. First Samuel 21 records the actual name of the Philistine king as Achish. David had been in a bad place, on the run from

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King Saul and living amongst Israel's enemies. God delivers him from the shadow of death, and David responds with overflowing praise. David provides us with an excellent example of the appropriate response to deliverance or answered prayer, that is to praise and bless the Lord. This is an acknowledgement that the deliverance has occurred and that it was the Lord who did the delivering and the answering of prayer. David urges us to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. In Jewish tradition, you worship God with all of your five senses. Worship is more than singing a song or hearing a sermon. The redemption of God is something that can be experienced in a real physical sense. David acknowledges that the 'afflictions of the righteous' are very real, but further that God's deliverance is also very much real.

Hebrews 7:23-28. Throughout the Epistle of Hebrews the author has stressed the greatness and superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over that of the Levitical priesthood. Chapter 7 is essentially a *midrash* on Psalm 110:4: 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'. A *midrash* is a Jewish form of commentary or exegesis on a passage or verse of scripture to expand our understanding, sometimes employing word play, allegory, or stories. In chapter 7 the author of Hebrews has suggested Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and Levi because of the tithes paid to him by Abraham. Then he argued that the order of Melchizedek is superior because the Levitical priesthood ultimately made nothing perfect under the Law, while Melchizedek was never a priesthood operating under the Law. In today's passage, the writer of Hebrews provides another reason. The Levitical priests were 'many in number', with the constant need for replacements due to their inherent mortality, while the Messiah is permanently the high priest due to his everlasting divine nature. The Mosaic priesthood endured constant change and inconsistency with successive priests being 'better or worse' than the former ones. By the time of Jesus, the Temple system had become quite corrupt. The office of the high priest was no longer a position held until death but was bought and sold as a political role. In contrast, Jesus has an unchangeable priesthood as he endures forever. His permanent status and role as high priest makes Jesus our permanent intercessor, and he is able to save for all time. The redemption and salvation offered by Jesus the Messiah is as unchanging as he is.

Mark 10:46-52. The healing of a blind man near Jericho is recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew reports that the incident involved two men, while Mark and Luke focus the attention of the story on one man. Only Mark's account provides his name. Augustine, one of our early church fathers, noted in his Harmony of the Gospels 2.65 that Mark provides both the name of Bartimaeus and that of his father Timaeus, a circumstance that rarely occurs in the Scriptures. This indicates that Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, had been a prominent figure that had fallen from prosperity due to his blindness. This short account offers several powerful teachings. Firstly we can note the persistence of blind Bartimaeus, who is determined to have a healing touch from Jesus. He addresses Jesus with the royal title of Son of David in loud cries, and he is not discouraged into silence when the crowd pressures him to be quiet. Jesus responds to his persistence by saying, 'Your faith has made you well'. What does Jesus mean by 'faith' in this passage? Does Bartimaeus believe Jesus to be the divine incarnation of Immanuel, God

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with us? Has he said the ‘sinner’s prayer’ and responded to an altar call? What does the word faith mean to Jewish people at the time of Jesus? The word faith, אמונה (*emunah*), appears in the Scriptures for the first time in Exodus 17. The context is the battle against Amalek. Israel had been rescued by the Lord from Egypt and was journeying towards Mount Sinai. A group of people, the Amalekites, descended on Israel hoping to enslave the newly freed people. The battle plan for Israel called for Moses to stand on a hill and hold his hands up while Joshua led the defenders. If Moses’ hands remain up, the Israelites will prevail. Exodus 17:12 says, in English, that Moses’ hands were steadfast, while in Hebrew it says that Moses held his hands up in אמונה (*emunah*). That is, Moses held his hands up in ‘faith’. אמונה (*emunah*) is not a noun in Hebrew; it is a gerund. A gerund is a word ending in ‘-ing’. Words like walking, looking, running are gerunds; they are formed from verbs. ‘Faithing’ doesn’t roll off the tongue so well. Perhaps, then, the better translation for *emunah* and its Greek counterpart *pistis* is actually faithfulness, which implies an action. Faith at the time of Jesus was more than simple belief. Faith is steadfast; it is persistence and determination not to give up but to endure. Bartimaeus believed Jesus could heal, and he refused to be quieted. The more they told him to shut up, the louder he became. Jesus could see his faith or faithfulness in action and commended him for it. Bartimaeus lived in a world of darkness, and he had the earnest desire to see. We again see the compassion and mercy of Jesus who, while on his way to Jerusalem to suffer death, still takes the time to bring the light to a dark world.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 59:9-20. Isaiah berates the people of Israel for having no interest in justice, thus justice and righteousness are far from them. Having given themselves over to darkness, darkness is all they have, and they don’t like it. They search for the light, but the light is not there. When our secular world casts God aside and we teach our children that they are nothing more than evolved animals, all we can expect from them is animal behaviour. As the prophet Isaiah says, we all growl like bears and moan like doves. The state of God’s people was no mystery to him as Isaiah says, ‘the Lord saw it and it displeased him.’ The people of Israel are in a bad place. However, the good news from the prophet is that God will not leave his people to grope around in despair and darkness, even if that darkness is the result of poor choices and behaviour. It is the Lord’s character to bring the light and to defeat darkness in all its forms. While Isaiah notes that no one came forward to intercede for the people, God himself becomes the redeemer, enshrining himself in metaphorical armour, similar to armour of God seen in Ephesians. In Ephesians, Paul urges us to put on the armour of God, while here in Isaiah it is the Lord who dons the mantle. The passage ends with the promise, declared by the Lord himself, that a redeemer is coming to Zion. God’s light and salvation are on the way; darkness cannot prevail forever.

Psalms 13. ‘How long, O Lord?’ This opening question in this psalm is probably a question we have all asked God at one time or another. How long will God allow the innocent to suffer? How long until the return of the Messiah? How long until God brings justice? David asks another ‘how long’ question: how long will you keep ignoring me? The feeling that we have been neglected by the Lord is probably a

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feeling we have all felt in our faith journey. David asks this question four times in this short psalm. We should note that there is a difference between feeling something to be true and it actually being true. David truly felt that God had forgotten him, but that was not actually the truth. David had the faith and trust in God to know that, even though he had powerful feelings of abandonment, this was not the reality of his situation. God had not left him, so he appeals to the Lord to ‘enlighten his eyes’. This is an excellent prayer for us when we are going through dark times, and we feel that God is not answering our prayers or has turned his face from us. We can ask for the Lord to bring his light and salvation into our situation. Light is often paired with salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ever since creation, the light of God has been chasing away the darkness and bringing his salvation with him. David ends the psalm in a state of confidence, with his feelings of neglect softening in the light of God. The darkness has passed, and in the last verses we find David declaring his trust in the unfailing love of God and rejoicing again in his salvation. Lord, restore to us again the joy of our salvation.

Hebrews 5:11-6:12. The writer of Hebrews admonishes his readers in their dullness of hearing. Being dull in hearing is not a problem of the ears but a problem of the heart. The hearts of the listeners are slow to respond in learning. The author finds his material hard to explain because his readers are not as interested as he would like them to be. The addressees of Hebrews apparently had been followers of Messiah for some time. The author chastises them for their immaturity, saying that they should have been teaching others by now and not still learning the basics. The basics are described as ‘milk’, and Hebrews 6 lays out some of the ‘basics’ as elementary principles: repentance and faith, baptism and laying of hands, resurrection and judgment. It is almost as though they are grouped in pairs, perhaps for ease of memory or the method by which they were taught in early catechesis. The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to go beyond the basics. It is not that the basics are bad. In fact, they are very, very good. However, there is nothing to be gained by immaturity. Following Jesus is not a static concept but implies motion and movement. Following Jesus means learning and growing in the walk of faith in which we learn to become better disciples. Every day in every way I am getting better and better, or as Hebrews says it, let us go on to maturity (some translations say perfection).

Hebrews 6:4-6 is one of those passages of Scripture in which it is almost impossible to make a comment without causing offence. There is always a temptation to read into the passage what we think it should be saying. The writer of Hebrews gives a warning to his dull of hearing and immature readers. The writer is speaking of people who have had amazing spiritual experiences including a sharing in the Holy Spirit, but who have fallen away, declaring the impossibility to be renewed again through repentance. Falling away is different from falling into sin. It is an important warning that we should not brush aside. We should also not become so entrenched in trying to figure out if we have personally fallen away beyond redemption, so as to be completely useless for service in the kingdom. The author of Hebrews encourages the believers to have ‘full assurance of hope until the end’. The basics of the faith already give us the hope and light of the Good News. Time for us to claim that assurance of forgiveness and progress to maturity, seeking to imitate the Lord more each day.

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