

“Preparing For Eternal Glory”

Matthew 10: 24-39

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In 1977, oil heiress Sandra Ilene West was buried in accordance with her last will and testament. Mrs. West had instructed that she be dressed in a white lace nightgown and placed in her blue Ferrari sports car “with the seat slanted comfortably.” The car was then placed in a crate and lowered by the crane into the nineteen foot long deep hole, then concrete was poured to protect the grave against any vandalism. Time Magazine would report that Californian Sandra Ilene West was journeying to her hereafter and eternal glory in style!

Our scripture lesson this morning from Matthew’s Gospel portrays a little different life style for most of us, maybe one that Mrs. West did not live because Jesus is instructing his apostles about the cost of discipleship. Telling them that Christianity is not an easy life. In fact, he tells them that they may be handed over to councils who will flog them and dragged before governors and kings. They will be betrayed by their families and hated by all because of the very name of Jesus. Who wants that, we wonder? Seriously, what kind of Sunday message is it to hear “children will rise against parents and have them put to death?” Now Jesus has their attention, and ours as well, but he goes on to say some things that have more comfort.

“Do not fear death, for the forces of evil may kill the mortal body, but they cannot kill the soul.” Then there is that beautiful poetic image: the sparrow, only worth a half a cent, is cared for and loved by God. Every sparrow and every hair on your head is cared for and loved by God.

Jesus is preparing his disciples to proclaim the Good News to the world and he reminds them to always remember that each person is precious in God’s sight. Jesus is preparing them to go out and preach the Good News and what is that Good News? If people declare that Jesus is their personal Savior will they go directly to Heaven, not needing to pass “Go” or collect \$200 on the way? Well not exactly!

Last Sunday Pastor Dea shared her sermon, “Compassion for the Harassed and Helpless.” And that message today is what Jesus calls the Good News: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus is insisting that people can live in God’s Kingdom today by being compassionate, loving, caring, and merciful which are the values that will reign as we prepare for His eternal glory. Have you ever thought that having a relationship with God would make your life a little easier? With God on your side, you can slide through life with no problems, right?

But then this reading from this morning might disabuse you of that notion. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah railed against God because he has been out doing what God asked him to do, and things have not gone quite as well as he had hoped. Jeremiah says, “I have become a laughingstock all day long and everyone mocks me. All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.”

In this somewhat bizarrely contrasting narrative, Jesus lays out two fundamental principles of our Christianity today. First, we are not, nor will we be spared from suffering and second, when we suffer God suffers along with us. So we look at the two basic tenets of the Christian life we live today. In all likelihood we are not going to be flogged before governors or hated by everyone, but at times we do and have struggled. We are currently dealing with the Coronavirus, some have grieved over the death of a loved one, some have lost jobs and others have undergone a myriad of difficult times.

I think what Jesus seems to be saying in this passage, in his somewhat own exaggerated manner is that we will most probably continue to suffer at times in our lifetime. The Christian life is not a magic fix to the woes of this mortal life. If that were the case, we would not have the manifestation of any evil, hate, or racism in our world today. Instead, everything would just be lovely!

As I drafted this sermon a few days ago, protests were still going on, CHAZ had their own section of Seattle, and all kinds of political pundits were espousing their views – some good, some not so good during these emotional times. I recently passed on a book to Dan by a Rabbi – “Not in God’s Name,” it is a book about hate and Christian oppression. It shares the stories of hate that has been experienced in our world today – mass murder of Coptic Christian children in Egypt, bombings at schools in our country, and then the desecration of our country’s hundred year old monuments. Not to mention the other values like our National Flag and Christian values that are being undermined by protesters and anti – Christian groups every day.

Perhaps as difficult as that picture may be, it is not a picture of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. It is not what we hope and pray for, not what Jesus came to earth to proclaim was coming, and – let’s face it – we are not there yet! So how are we to live in this world where hate, racism, and violence seem to be so rampant at times in our world?

It is obvious to me and other Christians that we need help from God. Thankfully, Franklin Graham is speaking out today that we need to put God back into our daily lives. President Trump can be justly criticized for many things, but I don’t think standing in front of a burned down Episcopal Cathedral with a Bible falls into the category of a mortal sin.

Where is the message of “love,” from our “Black Lives Matters,” Christian leaders? I/we pray for the message of “peace and love for our brotherly neighbors,” and that All Lives Matter to God!

We need the help of God and that’s the second point: Our God is with us. “He shall be called Emmanuel, God with us” as we remember from this past Advent Season. The promise made by Jesus is that we are not alone in our struggles. God is here, to comfort us, to help us through difficult times, to show us the way when we don’t know where to turn, to help us when we cannot help ourselves, and certainly to rejoice with us in the good times. We sometimes suffer in our mortal life here on earth, but God is with us, to comfort and guide us.

Perhaps we might think of these two things when we consider the current controversies of the day that seem to be entwined in – in the church, in our nation, and maybe sometimes in our

own families and communities. And at times, with every one of those issues, we want a resolution, we want to be out of the struggles. But could it be that no less that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ is calling us not to make an end to our struggle, but to be in the midst of it? And once we are in the very midst of it, perhaps the Holy Spirit could show us a way forward?

That may be how Jesus seems to imagine it at times. In this day and age we all have opinions of our own, but we must be interested in opposing views as well, hearing them and respecting them as well. There was a time when our various Christian denominations lived like that. We were respectful and polite and we listened to each other and for sure we didn't agree on every issue, but we agreed to continue on in the conversation. These days, we in the church maybe take ourselves too seriously. We imagine and presume that our debates and legislative actions will somehow bring about the salvation of the world.

In some respects it is kind of odd when you think about it. God-fearing people of every political stripe and theological persuasion presume to know the mind of God at times, in painful detail and with absolute certainty. I don't think that is our calling as a Christian people. Oh, we will have struggles and issues and every age and generation has had its own set of these to deal with. The God-made-human we worship calls us to be in the midst of the struggles of the world. And in our struggles, we are called not to engage in a fight to the finish, in which one group winds up the victorious insiders and other the dejected outsiders. But we are to proclaim to everyone on God's green earth that God is here, in the midst of us and to follow the message of what we have learned in Jesus Christ.

There are truly great people in the history of Christianity that have had difficult times. St. Teresa, known as Teresa of Avila was a famous theologian and at times was not well received in the community she loved. When her sisters had grown lax in faith and practice, she called for reform and their response was to throw her out of her out of the convent that she herself had established. On one occasion, she turned out in the middle of a rainstorm, on her donkey cart and was riding along when the wheel cart hit a ditch.

As the cart turned over, there she sat there in the mud and looked up to heaven and said, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you don't have many." But as frustrated as she was, Teresa clung to God and she would later write these beautiful words for a meditation titled:

"St. Teresa's Bookmark."  
Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing make you afraid,  
All things are passing,  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
Nothing is lacking to the one who has God,  
God alone is enough.

We, you and I, are called to be disciples and there is no doubt and at times, we are confronted and our lives will be challenged. We are never left alone in the world to scramble for a hiding place in the dust. The same God who inspires awe and fear reminds us in the Word of Sacrament of His love and grace for us as free gifts.

The anchor has long been a symbol in Christian art for the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to hear and practice the Good News as we prepare for our eternal glory in His kingdom. To be compassionate, loving caring for others which are the values that will reign supreme when the kingdom finally comes.

Our Bible has much to say about the hereafter. We know from Luke 16 that there is a heaven and hell. We know from Hebrews 9 that everyone will die once and then face judgment and our earthly possessions will have no worth after we breathe our last breath. Their glory will die when we do, but the glory of Christ is forever and when we put our trust in Him for eternal life, we will share in His glory in His Eternal Kingdom.

Amen