

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany 3-C; 27 January 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Life is Changing

In nomine...

I. Intro

A year ago today was my last day at my previous parish. We had our Annual Meeting that day. The next morning I flew out from Seattle to Philadelphia. I was about to begin serving a group of people whose representatives I had only met once through a video-conference and once in person. I was a little anxious. Life was changing.

And life wasn't changing just for me. The changes had ripple effects through Becky and the children. We had moved right in the middle of the school year. Together we were stepping out of countless important relationships and wondering how we would build new ones. What did God have in store for us here? Could we trust that it was something good?

I imagine that some of you had similar feelings about my arrival: and perhaps you still do! What was this new priest going to be like? What would happen to the St. Thomas' you'd known and loved? The only thing you could count on was that things were changing. But would those changes be good?

II. Thesis

Our readings today all speak to persons experiencing change – and wondering whether they can trust in God’s presence. Is God trustworthy? Are we able to trust God?

Our first reading, from Nehemiah, is one of my favorites because it is at the same time so strange and so familiar. Nehemiah dwells among a city of refugees who have just returned home after a long exile. As the city took shape, the returning people gathered and asked that the Torah, the account of God’s promises and God’s invitation to life with God, be read to them. It was a little like our Easter Vigil, if the Vigil lasted all week! What the people heard brought the people great joy, for God’s promises, and great sorrow, for the ways that they had missed out on knowing God heretofore. They had forgotten their own value in God’s eyes. They had forgotten how to be the people of God. And so they listened to God’s love letter to them.

These people were anxious. God’s invitation wasn’t familiar or comfortable. It wasn’t a low-key invitation. Wearing the right clothes, saying the right words, showing up at the right place on a Sabbath: these weren’t the most important things demanded by God’s law. Religious rites and good deeds were practices that led toward God, but they were just externalities, the shallow end of the pool. What the people heard in God’s law was an invitation to shed the water wings and jump into the deep end. They heard an invitation to faith: faith in God’s goodness, faith in God’s concern for them, faith in God’s good intentions for them in the particularity of their lives, and God’s ability to carry out those intentions. Faith which finds expression in a radical obedience by which they might open themselves to a deeper experience of God.

Likewise in our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians, this first generation of Christians is trying to understand what it means to be the people of God. The Church in Corinth is experiencing the new, unknown, and shocking. God’s power is at work in their community, but this experience is unnerving. It is scary, confusing, and disruptive. Embracing God’s presence and work among them means letting go of the familiar, letting go of hierarchy and domination and uniformity. They have received an invitation to have faith in God’s goodness, God’s concern, God’s intentions: a faith that would lead them, like the people of Nehemiah’s time, into a present experience of God’s love for them.

III. Good News

It is in our Gospel reading today, an event nestled in time between Nehemiah and the church in Corinth, yet an event that is timeless and ever new, that Jesus makes his cosmic proclamation from the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

Isaiah had summarized God's mission among humankind, the project with which God had been engaged since the very beginning. Isaiah was a participant in the project.

But Jesus claimed a different relationship to that project. Jesus said, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus said, The wait is over. The promise is not for someday, somewhere over the rainbow. God's kingdom isn't just about a promise of heaven when you die. Eternal life doesn't start sometime in the future. *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* When Jesus came along, all that the people in Nehemiah's day had yearned for, hadn't even dared to hope for, had cried in their fearful disbelief of, was made known and present.

After Jesus' resurrection, the church in Corinth struggled to escape from their own fears and preoccupations in order to recognize and live into what Jesus meant for their lives. Something new was happening. But would those changes be good? Was God trustworthy?

IV. Invitation

I've been at St. Thomas' for a year, now. We've been through a whole cycle of feasts and fasts together. I am excited about the work we have begun to do together. I give thanks to God every day for the privilege of being here and serving among you. I give thanks for the history that has made St. Thomas' the church it is today, and the future that lies ahead of us.

But here's the thing. God's promise for St. Thomas' is a promise for today. It's not about a continuation of the past. There is much to be proud of in our past, and much that continues to guide us. But God's work isn't about nostalgia and wishing for the good old days. St. Thomas' isn't a museum!

Likewise, God's work isn't primarily in the future. God's work is not primarily among our dreams and expectations. I have a hint for you: your dreams are too small. All of our dreams are too small. God can and will do great things among us, things we can't even imagine. But the future is not given to us any more than the past is. The future lies in God's hands.

What is given to us is today. "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Today, that is present and accessible. Today in all of its mundane details of changing the light-bulbs, getting wine stains out of a purificator, and driving the church van. Today in counting and cleaning and voting at the Annual Meeting. It is here and now, today, and in the things we do today, that God chooses to act and to be present among us. The mundane becomes holy, tasks become ministry, and God speaks to us good news of liberty, sight, and justice.

God has a track record of goodness. That's why we read scripture: to hear the record of God's works among us. To learn about the ways that God works and to learn to see those same patterns as God works in our lives today. If God was faithful in the past, you can bet God is faithful today.

God is trustworthy. God is good. And it is God's goodness that empowers us, emboldens us, to participate in God's goodness. "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Today we step forward in obedience to encounter God together.

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