



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Holy Tuesday - March 30, 2021

Scripture Passages: Luke 4:16-21

+I speak to you in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well folks. Here we are. A year later. Who would have believed it? I remember the naïveté with which the decision to close our parishes last March was made. I honestly thought it would all be over in weeks – or at the most, a few months.

Instead, what we thought was a sprint has turned into a marathon. And it's not the regulation 42 and change kilometers. No one really knows where the finish line will be at this point – we can see it, but it's somewhere in the middle distance.

And we've all begun to hit what I'm told marathon runners call the dreaded wall – the point where glycogen stores run dry and runners have to slow down – and sometimes walk.

And that's really not surprising. For over a year now we've been trying to reinvent the wheel putting in hours and hours of trying to think up creative ways to do ministry without physical presence – but that still meet the Covid protocols. You have done that brilliantly – its been humbling to watch you pivot again and again to meet the times with a kind of flexibility that I'm not sure we knew we possessed. And your support of the decisions we've had to make for the safety of all has been truly appreciated. I know how frustrating that has been at times – and yet you have proved over and again that we are truly in this together. And here we are, in our second pandemic Holy Week.

You deserve medals for patience. In this Covid-driven reality, everything seems to take twice as long – those of you with 3 and 4-hour virtual vestry meetings can attest to that! And that's not counting the preparation and the mounting of charm offensives to overcome inertia and opposition to this kind of fundamental change.

It's all been quite different to what we might have expected.

The fact is, we are in a new story now. A story that we didn't see coming but which nonetheless defines our reality – and which will also shape our future.

And it's not all bad. It has been a crucible of invention and ingenuity. For all the difficulty, there have been silver linings. The rediscovery of the daily office has been one. It has proved its worth as a life-sustaining, faith-sustaining, blessedly routinized ritual that has become for many a touchstone of spiritual and emotional health. It's interesting that the repetition and Benedictine stability of the office have been so important during this time.

Our collective fragility has I think, surprised us – some have said that those who had pre-existing mental and physical challenges have actually done better in the pandemic because they had existing practices and structures for support in place. I think we are discovering again the value and formation of such spiritual guideposts in our own lives. They will certainly see us through this dark night of the soul and I hope that we'll continue to acknowledge their value into the future.

The pandemic has also forced us to re-evaluate what is truly meaningful in our lives. Have you noticed the importance – and I'd go further: the holiness of the ordinary? We have definitely been beckoned to go deeper not wider. To plumb the depths of our inner resources.

We are in a new story now.

I wonder if the folks in that synagogue in Nazareth had any idea that that was the case for them too as they heard Jesus – “Joseph's boy, you know, the carpenter's son,” say that the scriptures that he'd just read had been fulfilled in their hearing. He meant of course that they were being fulfilled by him.

Jesus was telling them that they were in a new story too.

A story that was the fulfillment of prophecy made long ago by a Prophet who spoke to a people in exile; a people in displacement and confusion about who and whose they were. That prophet called them, knowing that the only way forward was to go back to God in whom they'd find wholeness, integrity, strength, and health.

And Jesus inhabited that story – and offered them a new interpretation of it. He was telling them that he was that path back. He was the way, he was the truth and the life they were seeking as faithful people. He was the answer to all the questions they'd been asking. And at first, as we know, that was great. Folks appreciated him – praised him. It was great until he was honest with them about what needed to change in their lives.

Until he spoke some home truths to them about their hypocrisies. Then it was all “who does this guy think he is – he’s just Joseph’s boy – you know the carpenter’s son.” And he’s run out of town.

They might have been in a new story, but it’s not one that they liked very much.

And I think we can understand that. We who are in the midst of a new story too – an anxiety- producing story. This pandemic has caused us to ask some uncomfortable questions like:

Who am I, as a priest, as a minister, if I can't do those things that are bedrock to parts of my vocation like – showing up in person, laying hands, touching, anointing with oil? Who am I if I can't celebrate the Eucharist with real people? If I can't baptize? If I can't do funerals and help the bereaved grieve? These are questions that lead us to answers we never thought we'd ever have to contemplate; different answers because we're in a new story.

But if I'm honest, I'm not sure that's the real problem. I wonder if the real problem is that we have been assailed with the anxiety that it doesn't matter. What we do, how we do it, doesn't matter in this new story.

But let me tell you firmly that that's absolutely not true.

You see, Jesus came to show us God's love. But he wrote a new story – one folks weren't expecting. It was clear from the first that the Kingdom wasn't going to be flashy – Satan tried to tempt Jesus to do the flashy “Son of God” thing in the wilderness. But that wasn't Jesus' modus operandi. He was interested in healing. In slow love. In restoration. In justice. In the transformation of structures of oppression with the drip, drip, drip of a single-minded focus on right – not might.

And you and I know that the Kingdom of God is revealed in daily acts – of seeming smallness – that we perform as servants of Christ: a call to an isolated elderly parishioner, a few dollars donated to a homeless shelter; meals prepared and delivered to folks who were wondering where their next meal was going to come from; prayers for a young person experiencing fragile mental health; listening to a warden whose husband is enduring health challenges at the same time putting aside your own worries about a loved one. The worship in spirit and truth that we offer God. These are daily acts of faithfulness.

They are small acts. None of them is a grand gesture. None of them in and of themselves is going to change the world. But the aggregate over a life of service, the aggregate over many lives and many years and many churches does. That's the kingdom of God, being revealed in great love - right here, right now.

This quiet, halting, and yes, flawed action has always been God's way of operating ever since he chose an obscure and childless couple of senior citizens to found a mighty nation way back in Genesis 12. And yes, it matters folks. It definitely matters. Your faithfulness, your commitment matters.

An old hymn – an old Methodist hymn to be precise - has been running through my mind for a few weeks now – unbidden. I must have heard it somewhere. Or perhaps my memory conjured it up as question we're all asking about this last year.

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

You know it takes a lot of faith to believe that the man who sat down in the synagogue in Nazareth that day was very God of very God, and Light from Light. It takes a lot faith to believe that “Joseph's boy” was the Creator of the cosmos. And it takes a lot of faith to believe Jesus when he says that something as inspiringly prophetic as Isaiah 61 is being fulfilled. But that faith is our anchor in the storms of life.

And when you as leaders that attend to the things that matter: love, compassion, belonging, being present, walking alongside, being patient, sharing in grief, celebrating in life, answering questions, striving for justice – leaders that attend to all those things faithfully are playing their part in the slow, inexorable, irresistibly loving work of God.

You see, the work of ministry is crucial and pivotal and indispensable precisely because there is no one except the Church to name and evoke the tension between the way the world is - and the way God wants it to be - and who will, with God's help, manage a way through it.

I see more than ever now, the holiness of the day-to-day stuff clergy and licensed lay workers do and I think, my God, what would happen if they were not there and did not do it?

The role of ministry is as urgent as it has ever been – it's also wondrous and difficult.

So, although we're in a new story now, I pray that today you will renew your vows in a spirit of trust; trust that the Christ who proclaims healing and restoration, and a right order to God's creation will fill in our shortcomings. And that we will, in the power of the Holy Spirit, find our way through together precisely because we are anchored in Christ.

Because,
we have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.