

Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

There are some verses of the bible
that ring in our ears.
Sometimes they are ones
that we were required to memorize
in our childhood Sunday School classes.
“for God so loved the world that he gave his begotten son...”
“Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life...”
“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want...”

Others make their way into our minds
because they contain phrases that have made their way into our everyday language,
The story of the prodigal son,
Jesus saying, “you are the salt of the earth”;
Paul’s reflection,
“I have fought the good fight.”

And still others
are there because they are part of our liturgies,
and we have heard and prayed them
time after time.
Things like the comfortable words, those assurances we hear after the confession in Rite
1,
and the story of the Last Supper
in our Eucharistic prayers,
and the introductory words in the baptism service,
 There is one Body and one Spirit
 There is one hope in God’s call to us;
 One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism;
 One God and Father of all
which comes straight from Ephesians chapter 4.
All those texts
ring in our ears;
and they shape the way we understand and interpret
the things that happen around us.

That’s the reason

that observant Jews
follow the tradition of reciting the Shema morning and evening, drawn from the
Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible.

They begin:

Shema' yisrael: Adonai eloheynu Adonai echad.
Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Keep these words that I am commanding you today
in your heart.
Recite them to your children
and talk about them when you are at home
and when you are away,
when you lie down and when you rise.
Bind them as a sign on your hand,
fix them as an emblem on your forehead,
and write them on the doorposts of your house
and on your gates.

Those words
become part of them;
they shape the way they see the world.

Just as Scripture,
the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures,
and the New Testament.
They ring in our ears;
they help us see the world
from God's perspective,
they give us insight
as we struggle to make sense of life.

As I read our psalm for today
it was verse eighteen that caught my attention.

It caught my attention, because I know it.
For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
and the hope of the poor shall not perish for ever.

It's a verse
that forms one of the traditional versed response prayers

of Evening Prayer:

Let not the needy be forgotten
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

And it was this verse that rang in my ears on Thursday when I was working on this sermon, as within the space of a few hours the following news stories appeared in my email.

At noon, Roman time, the Vatican released the papal encyclical, “Laudato Si’,” or “Praise Be to You.”

Pope Francis began his letter on the environment with a quotation from Saint Francis, after whom he took his name:

Praise be to you, my Lord,
through our Sister, Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit
with coloured flowers and herbs.

Almost two hundred pages long, in it, the pope intermingles an analysis of the existing state of our natural world and what may have contributed to that with theological reflections on the relationship between God, humanity, and the environment.

My quick read of it left me agreeing with some things, and questioning or disagreeing with others, but one area in which he is particularly persuasive is the effect of the environmental destruction on the world’s poorest people.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, *
and the hope of the poor shall not perish for ever.

Earlier in the day,

I had read a story about the Wayuu people of the province of La Guajira in Colombia. There were great plans to build a dam to prevent water shortages at times of drought, but the project has stalled.

Only a limited amount of water is released, and by the time it reaches the middle of the province, barely a trickle remains, the rest sucked away by the demands of rice fields, cattle ranches and the world’s largest open-pit coal mine.

And so the Wayuu people make do with oily, brackish water from local wells

that is unsafe
to drink.
But they drink it anyway,
rather than die
of thirst.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, *
and the hope of the poor shall not perish for ever.

And in church news, the Bishop of Durham
reported on a visit he made on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury
to the Anglican Church of Burundi.

There is violence and intimidation by both youth militia and government forces; leaders
of political opposition groups have been assassinated.

People have left their homes in fear,
which means crops have not been planted, prices have risen,
and food is becoming scarce.

They are afraid of a return to civil war,
and that the world will simply ignore their plight.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, *
and the hope of the poor shall not perish for ever.

But that verse
was not enough
for the next news story
that appeared.

Charleston, South Carolina.
Nine people killed:
Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
Cynthia Hurd
Susie Jackson
Ethel Lee Lance
DePayne Middleton-Doctor
Clementa Pinckney
Tywanza Sanders
Daniel Simmons Sr.
Myra Thompson

A State Senator, a barber
a teacher
a librarian
a new graduate,
a custodian
and admissions director
a clergy wife,
among them all, four pastors.

All of them at a mid week bible study.
All of them black.

I have referred to racism in my sermons
more times in the last eight months
than in the previous seven years.
And there's a reason for it.
The reason is
that there have been more and more times
when color and race
have been at least part of the story
behind the deaths
of people in this country.
Sometimes
the individuals
have contributed to those situations.
But this time,
this time
it is clear
that the only thing
that the victims did
was show up at church
for Wednesday bible study.
To show up
and welcome a young stranger
different from them
to join them for bible study.

And then he turned on them,
and he killed them,
as far as we can tell,

simply because of the color of their skin.

And I have to admit
that my immediate response
was fear.

Fear that perhaps
we could be sitting in a bible study
or a worship service,
and someone would come
and shoot us.

Or that our chaplain at the University
could be targeted,
or the people who come to our food pantry, or the people who get off the train each
morning here in St James
to go work as home health aides and nannies.

And that verse
that first drew my attention in our psalm today,
that verse
is not enough to make sense of this.
If we can make sense of it at all.
We need to turn to the whole psalm portion.

The first part of the psalm, the part we didn't read, that part
begins
with thanksgiving to God. But it quickly turns
to the theme of enemies,
the ungodly,
who God will assuredly
judge and destroy.
But it hasn't happened
yet.
And so we come to our portion today,
and our psalmist
does exactly what we do.
Jumping between statements
about who God is
and what we expect God to do.

God will be a refuge.

God won't forsake us.
God won't forget
 the afflicted.
God will remember the poor.

And,
Have pity on us.
Rise up, O God!
Judge them.
Put fear into them.
Stop this happening!

The psalm
echoes my feelings this week.
You've made all these promises, God.
Now do something!

But here's the hard part.

Because we know,
we know
how it is with God.
The way God works
is through the people of God.
It's through people like us.

In our epistle today, from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians,
Paul ends this section with the plea,
"Open wide your hearts!"
It's the culmination of a discussion that began long before
the section read today,
and it's a discussion
of the ministry
that God has called all those who follow Christ to,
that God has called us to.

God has called us
to the ministry of reconciliation.
Helping others become
reconciled to God,

and in so doing
building reconciliation
with one another, because
all of us who are baptized,
as Paul wrote,
whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female,
all of us are one.
We belong together.

And so
as we struggle with the news from South Carolina,
we are called, yes,
to affirm God's care for us,
and yes, to call on God to do something,
but above all,
to be the people of God
working for reconciliation,
so that no one
need be afraid
to come into this church,
no one.
And no one
need be afraid
to walk down the street.
No one.

We
have
God
on our side.
Christ is with us.
It's time for us
to do what God has called us to do.
To be agents
of reconciliation.

To reach out those among us
who are different from us.
To build bridges.
To be the face of Christ

offering
the gift of friendship
and grace
and love
in a troubled time.

Tonight, at 6pm
Bethel AME church in Setauket
is holding a memorial service
for those who were killed in South Carolina.
Some of them were relatives of members at Bethel.

I invite you to join me there
as we show our love and support
for our Christian brothers and sisters.

If you can't be there - and even if you can -
think of ways that you can reach out
and build relationships
with those who are unlike you.
Sharing with them
the peace that Christ brings
in a stormy and
tumultuous
world.