

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Thank you for your beautiful reflection, Loretta! One of the many things I love about this community of St. Mary's is that you all care so much for each other within and outside this parish community. You are not going through the motions, doing the church things as a get out of jail free card.

Too often in Israel and the church's history the people of God have fallen into a transactional exchange with God. We think we earn God's favour by doing certain things. Isaiah sharply criticizes Israel for offering sacrifices expecting divine favor, rather than seeking justice or transformation. God is not rejecting worship itself, but worship divorced from justice. The issue is not the *form* of religion but its *emptiness*. Sacrifice becomes detestable when it masks injustice. Verse 13 is especially striking: "New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity." God desires righteousness more than ritual. I love this line: "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord." The Hebrew here has a sense of let us walk and reason together. It's an invitation into a relationship. God wants to talk with us. How amazing is that? Immediately after this, God says, if your sins are scarlet and crimson, they will become as white as snow and wool. This is a description of transformation that happens when you are in relationship with God, not just trying to appease God.

This is picked up in our psalm today as Loretta has spoken about.

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. ²³ Those who bring thanksgiving as their

sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way, I will show the salvation of God.”

The Hebrew of v. 23 could also be read as “the one who sets a way,” evoking the image of someone orienting their life towards God’s path. Thanksgiving, not ritual, is the true sacrifice. God desires gratitude. Why? Because he needs his ego stroked? No, because God knows that when we enter a posture of gratitude, we move away from an attitude of earning God’s love or approval. There is a humility, a knowledge that all we have is a gift from God, we can not earn it, we can not merit it. It’s all grace!

This brings us to our text in the Letter to the Hebrews this morning. The authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews is one of the most debated questions in New Testament studies. The text itself is anonymous, and the early church did not agree on who wrote it. Modern scholars agree that it was not Paul, but they can’t agree on who it was. My favourite theory is that the author was Priscilla, a prominent early Christian leader we know of from Paul. What we do agree on is that the author was a highly educated Jewish Christian, likely writing in Greek, with deep knowledge of temple traditions and the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, which Jesus and his apostles would have known and used.

Our reading today is all about faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1) Contrary to what I was taught when younger, faith is not about certainty. Nadia Bolz-Weber says that “The opposite of faith isn’t doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.” she emphasizes that faith is not found in unwavering belief or absolute assurance. Instead, faith is the

posture of holding open space amid uncertainty—remaining engaged even when we don't "know" everything. When everything feels fixed, the life of faith ceases. Faith is not an accomplishment, something done by our own efforts and through gritted teeth. It isn't something we can conjure up. Think of it more like openness, like acceptance, like surrender, like receiving something life-giving and empowering. Richard Rohr says that faith emerges only when we relinquish control—the ego letting go so we can be held. Faith expresses itself in love, not just belief, but loving action in the world.

The writer of Hebrews uses this wonderful percussive sequence by faith, by faith, by faith. In Greek it has the same rhythm. *Pistei, pistei, pistei*. "By faith our ancestors received...by faith we understand... by faith Abraham obeyed... by faith he stayed... by faith, with Sarah's involvement (mind you!), he received power of procreation, even though he was too old." Abraham and Sarah believed because they trusted the one who had given them the promise. They were in a relationship with God. God calls us into a relationship too. He call us to walk faithfully with him into the future he has promised. And what is this promise?

In our Gospel today Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." You may recall that the last time I was here I taught on the Lord's Prayer in Luke and mentioned that for Luke, The Holy Spirit is the same as the Kingdom of God. For it is through the Holy Spirit that the Kingdon comes. Also remember the last verse from that reading in Luke 11, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" our promise is that God will give us the Holy Spirit and working through us will bring about the Kingdom of God. As Loretta said, when we are open to the

Holy Spirit, she gives us her fruit of love, joy, and peace. These fruits bring about the kingdom of God, a kingdom where there is good, justice and equity, the oppressed are rescued, the orphans and widows are defended and taken care of.

One of the most astonishing lines in our Gospel reading this morning reverses the role of master and servant. “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.” The master serves the servant! This is the kingdom of God! Jesus also modeled this for us at the last supper as he washed the feet of his disciples. He was their rabbi, their teacher, their master, yet he humbled himself to serve them and commanded us to do likewise.

Who are we called to serve? Who are the oppressed, the orphans, and widows that need rescuing? What is ours to do? With the faith of our ancestors, Sarah and Abraham, let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to bring about God's Kingdom of love, joy, peace, justice and abundance!

Amen.