

Sermon – Second Sunday After Epiphany

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *In a world consumed by power, we are called, by the testimony of John and the invitation of Jesus, to come and see a better way: a way of mercy and peace provided by a God who is revealed in co-suffering love.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline

1. “What are you looking for?”
 - a. If you found a genie...
 - i. My second son, Elias, has all manner of strategies for making the most of a genie and the three wishes: while the stories are clear that you can’t wish for more wishes, there’s no prohibition on wishing for more genies.
 - ii. One of his schemes involves using the first wish to summon a new genie, the second wish for whatever you might want, and the third to set the old genie free. Under this scheme, you get an infinite stream of those second wishes, without enslaving or exploiting the genies.
 - iii. The kid loves a good loophole!
 - b. Jesus asks “What are you looking for?”
 - i. Probably something deeper than more wishes, and deeper than riches and luxuries and enjoyable experiences
 - ii. John points to Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
 - c. Like many of you, I want to see that realized right now!
 - i. Massive deaths in Iran, ongoing warfare in Ukraine and Sudan and others
 - ii. Instability in Venezuela and Palestine and Gaza, which could easily erupt into more violence
 - iii. The incredible mess in our own country, especially in Minneapolis / St. Paul.
 - d. Right now, I’d be happy to take a loop hole!
 - i. We want quick fixes, even when we know it’s not realistic.
 - ii. Failing that, we want to have some guarantee, or at least some hope that things will improve, that our faith really does have some bearing.
 - iii. We know the possibility of individual change, but does it really happen at a societal level? Or are we just kidding ourselves?
2. Signs of Hope // Anchors in the Storm
 - a. Dominion
 - i. Author is a historian of ancient world, especially the Roman Empire, who was eventually struck by how different the world was in that time.
 - ii. In Rome, power and honor were primary values. Mercy was no virtue, and pride was no sin. Infants would be left out to die from exposure, and criminals would be tortured to death on trees.

- iii. He asks what changed, and this massive book is his exploration of the thesis that Christianity made all the difference. The early followers of Jesus cared for the vulnerable, formed communities where people shared resources and the poor were lifted up, and enemies were loved. Indeed, we have record of a Roman emperor remarking how strange it was that Christians “care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.”
- iv. Christians venerated not power, but one who was crushed by the powerful – and they were willing to give their lives in following him. And, this did change the world – at a societal level, even though it took centuries to do so (and even though the empire would wear off negatively on the church as well).

b. Dr. King

- i. This kind of change is not only something reserved for distant history. Tomorrow we celebrate the life of a modern prophet and leader who also changed the world by following Jesus.
- ii. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr called out the contradiction between America’s professed ideals and our actual treatment of people of color. He articulated a dream for a future in which his children, and all people, would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”.
- iii. Through nonviolent protest and civil disobedience, Dr. King led a movement to demand justice, and they achieved social change in the stirring of peoples’ consciences and through the passage of the Civil Rights Act.
- iv. Before his assassination, Dr. King would broaden his focus, speaking out about the unjust war in Vietnam, preaching about the triple evils of racism, materialism, and militarism, and starting to organize the working poor of all races to demand more equitable pay and social justice.
- v. In all of this, Dr. King was driven by his belief in, and his encounter with, the God who is revealed not in power, but through co-suffering love in the person of Jesus.

3. How do we have a similar impact today?

- a. Transformation does begin with individuals...
 - i. That’s the only way we can get to societal change!
 - ii. But – it is a very particular (and narrow!) path that must be walked if positive change is to be possible.
 - iii. In the words of Dr. King, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”
 - iv. As tempting as it is to fight fire with fire, that just keeps us in the same cycles of violence and destruction.
- b. The example of John – and ultimately of Jesus.
 - i. Notice that the depiction of him in this passage (truly, in all of John’s gospel) is different than other depictions – no fiery words, no condemnations of religious leaders, not even any baptisms depicted (only referenced)
 - ii. Instead of John the Baptist, we see here, in this Gospel, John the Testifier. He points faithfully to Jesus, even when that means that his disciples leave him.
 - iii. Building on John’s testimony, Jesus invites people to “Come and see” the reality of his love and his mercy – to come and see the reality of God revealed in suffering and death and resurrection.

- iv. And, while it may not be quick, this reality is transformational. It can take a poor, uneducated, easily frightened fisherman like Simon and transform him into Peter – the rock who would lead the early church in transforming the Roman empire into the image of Jesus.
- c. Our task, in a world which again worships power
 - i. So, societal change is possible, but it is no easy task.
 - ii. Our world is coming more and more to look like Rome, and mercy is no longer a clear virtue. We venerate power and success and wealth, and we look to those for our own well-being and satisfaction. In the words of a leading & influential national figure (Stephen Miller), "You can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else. But we live in a world, in the real world...that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world."
 - iii. In response, our only hope is to point to Jesus, to shape our lives in his image, to accept his invitation to come and see an alternative vision mercy and love – and to share that invitation with the world around us.
 - iv. This is not quick and easy work – there are no genies or loop holes, unfortunately! But, as we see in the readings from Isaiah and 1 Corinthians today, God promises to faithfully meet us in this work, and to bring it to fulfillment.

Amen.