

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Proper 19 Year C
September 11, 2016

Friday evening, during our Ladies' Paint Nite, our instructor Dee showed us how to create various shades of blue which we would use for the sky which peeked out from behind the glorious sunflower petals we were painting. Understandably, some of the shades of blue were cooler, as we used a bit more of the white in the mixture, while some of the shades of blue were warmer, tending toward the blue-green spectrum, as we mixed in a bit of yellow. We chose the color for our particular painting based on which shade would provide the most contrast to our orange, red, or yellow sunflower petals. We were looking for the correct accent of blue to help the sunflower "pop", to be noticed, to be dramatic in its contrast of color.

As I was mixing my shade of blue that evening, an image floated across my mind and heart, which drew me to this date, September 11th, fifteen years ago. I remembered vividly the bright blue color of the sky that morning, and it was the contrast to the spiritual darkness of the day which made the image "pop", or be noticed and remembered in my heart. Do you remember this too? The sky that morning, at least in Lancaster, was a pure and clear bright blue, interrupted only by a few passing fluffy white clouds. The air was crisp and almost sparkled with lightness. How odd that was to me, that the day could be so glorious and filled with the radiance of light and goodness, when elsewhere the world had turned so dark.

I remember a lot of that morning. I remember all of the staff in the rector's office, huddled around a small TV, some of us pacing, others of us sitting with our heads in our hands, others of us drastically trying to reach family members who worked in the Pentagon. The priests began gathering their prayer books to plan the funeral mass they would offer at noon that day for the victims. From this place of utter darkness, smoldering despair, utter disbelief in the depravity of humankind, and an abiding sense of the presence of evil which was consuming my soul, I walked out into the bright blue autumn sky. It was beautiful and it was memorable. It was a day you would have loved to be sitting outside, turning your face, like a sunflower, into the sun, soaking up the goodness and grace the world offered. The contrast of this scene to the events we witnessed inside that morning on TV was stunning and revelatory: there was still light in the world that even the worst of actions could not extinguish.

The tolling church bell beckoned us all into a place where, for hundreds of years, God's presence had not failed the congregation; it was large and steady enough to hold the communal grief. We prayed, we cried, we turned to God, and as difficult as it was, our priests invited us to turn our hearts toward forgiveness.

This scenario just described, especially in the contrast of light and dark, between the presence of God filling the hearts of those gathered in church and the presence of evil and destruction flooding the streets of New York City, Shanksville, and the Pentagon, is exactly what our psalm today is all about. It is a psalm that contains lament, structured as a wisdom psalm, clearly

delineating the righteous from evil, and instructs us on the unfailing presence of God, even in our utter unworthiness.

The revelatory message in our psalm is that the sky is still blue in the midst of the terrible chaos the world presents; the sun will still shine in the midst of darkness; God will remain faithful to us in the midst of our unfaithfulness. The day of our rescue will come.

The first line of our psalm informs us that for the fool there is no God. It's helpful to know that in this context the word fool does not mean someone stupid or silly, but rather someone corrupt and morally deficient, skilled in doing evil, and performing abominable deeds. The psalmist connects not knowing or needing God with foolishness and then with subsequent evil actions, both in terms of what reprehensible acts are performed as well as what charitable acts are not done for the poor and those in need, for these are folks that God always searches out and defends. So, in this context, a fool is someone who engages in evil ways, cares not for the poor, and doesn't need God.

Now it would really handy to be able to point to others to whom this psalm is referring, rather than looking within our own hearts for that foolish part of us all, but the intent of the psalm is to invite us all to look within for the ways that we act as though there is no God in our daily lives. When we function autonomously, when we believe we can and do control our own lives, when we chose not to put God's will in our daily life, with each decision we make, with each action we take, with each stirring of the heart, when we forget to pray, ignore the desire within us to study the scripture, or choose not to take the time for God each day, the psalmist would speak of us as foolish. The psalmist would argue that we are foolish each time we do not love God with our whole heart, mind, body, and soul, when we don't love our neighbor as ourselves, and when we create policies and community structures which destroy the poor. You probably have noticed by now, after my preaching centering on the psalms this past month, that the main theme in the psalms is always social justice. God is now, and always has been, caring for those most in need, those marginalized in our society, those shunned from the religious societies, those disregarded in our social groups, and those who are feeling lost in their chaotic and confusing lives of despair. When we understand that there are places that we need to grow into to cast away the foolishness of our hearts, the day of our rescue will come.

And here's how the psalm connects with our gospel reading today. What does Jesus do with all these marginalized and rejected people who have been shunned by the religious community of his day, the ones not cared for by the foolish? He searches them out and invites them to the table. Not to their own table, set off to the side, but to join the others at the main table at the banquet. He draws them near with his endless mercy and care. This is radical hospitality. And when we enter into this extended embrace of God, we are aware that the day of our rescue has begun. It's clear to me that the day of our rescue begins each time we open our doors and offer this radical hospitality to those in need in our community. I sense the sky has gotten a bit brighter for others with each meal we serve and we relationship we build.

The contrasts in all our stories this morning are extreme. Jeremiah speaks of a time of total despair, when the nation of Israel has completely lost their compass point and the distinction between their unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness is striking. The psalmist contrasts the foolish, those who don't need God, with God's utter faithfulness to them. Paul's "road to Damascus story" contrasts his former life of blasphemy and persecution of the Christians to his devotion to living a life in Christ, and the gospel contrasts the complete inclusion of Jesus to the exclusion of the Pharisees or religious community. All of our stories speak of God's faithfulness to us: in our times of joy and despair, in our times of clarity and confusion, in our times of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, in our times of wisdom and foolishness, God is faithful. Our baptismal covenant calls us to hold onto this vision of a God who is present in our anguish at the world around us and of a God who searches us out to bring us into the bright blue sky again. There is a God who is full of mercy and grace and who searches for us, until we are found. This is the God we meet at the Eucharistic table. This is the invitation for us, to be found. Our stories tell us that God's redemptive purposes for God's people will not ultimately be thwarted. The blue sky will appear again. The day of our rescue will happen.

Today when we hear the musical tribute of taps played for the ones lost to us that day fifteen years ago, we remember they are not lost to God. God's redemptive role in their lives has not been thwarted. We remember that there is nothing that can keep them or us from the love of God, not even death.

The contrast moments in our lives are ones to pay attention to, for they challenge our assumptions, and when we are challenged, we are opened for transformation, for hearing the message of God, for seeing the light in the darkness, for allowing hope to rise up again in our hearts, to hear anew Jesus' invitation to come to the table and be fed.

Amen.