

Grace Church. Haddonfield
November 14, 20034 Proper 28c

THE GOSPEL READING WE HAVE JUST HEARD FOR THIS SUNDAY IS NOT THE MOST ENDEARING GOSPEL ACCOUNT FOR MOST OF US. WE HEARD TODAY ABOUT THE TEMPLE; THERE WILL NOT BE LEFT ONE STONE UPON ANOTHER. THEY WILL ALL BE THROWN DOWN. AND JESUS PROPHECIES THAT NATION WILL RISE AGAINST NATION; THERE WILL BE GREAT EARTHQUAKES AND FAMINES AND PESTILENCES; AND THERE WILL BE THOSE WHO WILL LAY THEIR HANDS UPON YOU AND WHO WILL PERSECUTE YOU; EVEN, YOU WILL BE HATED FOR MY NAME'S SAKE.

WE DON'T LIKE TO HEAR THIS KIND OF THING. WHAT WE ALL LIKE TO HEAR ARE PASSAGES LIKE, 'I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD,' AND STORIES AND PARABLES OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN AND THE PRODIGAL SON. WE ALL LIKE COMFORTING STORIES, NICE STORIES. STORIES THAT MAKE US FEEL GOOD. WE LIKE TO FORGET THAT THERE IS A RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT WITH GOD AND A FAITHFULNESS ON OUR PART TO GOD. JESUS WARNS US TODAY, NOT TO BE LED ASTRAY; THAT PEOPLE WILL DECEIVE US AND HE WARNS THAT THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL DELIVER YOU UP, EVEN TO DEATH.

IT ALL SOUNDS HEAVY. TOO HEAVY! BUT IT IS A MESSAGE THAT WE NEED TO HEAR. WE CANNOT ACCEPT THE PASTORAL MINISTRY, THE LOVING, CARING MINISTRY OF GOD IN JESUS WITHOUT

UNDERSTANDING THAT THERE IS A PROPHETIC MINISTRY WHICH STANDS SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE PASTORAL. BUT REMEMBER, WITH ALL THE DIFFICULT THINGS IN THE GOSPEL TODAY, THERE IS ALSO A PROMISE. JESUS SAYS: 'NOT A HAIR ON YOUR HEAD WILL PERISH. BY YOUR ENDURANCE, YOU WILL GAIN YOUR LIFE.'

AND PAUL HAS AN ADMONITION FOR US TODAY. THAT WAS IN THE SECOND READING IN HIS EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS. I INTERPRET IT THAT PAUL IS TELLING US TO KEEP OUR EYES ON JESUS, THE ONE WHO INSPIRES AND PERFECTS OUR FAITH.

IT IS VERY EASY TO TAKE OUR EYES OFF JESUS. AND ALL TOO OFTEN WE DO IT DELIBERATELY. WE MAY HAVE WHAT SEEMS TO BE PEACE IN OUR LIVES SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ARE NOT LISTENING TO JESUS. THE LACK OF DIVISION COULD BE DUE TO COMPROMISE. IN OTHER WORDS, WE ARE AT PEACE BECAUSE WE HAVE STOPPED BEING CONCERNED ABOUT THE INJUSTICES THAT EXIST AROUND US. WE MAY BE AT PEACE BECAUSE WE HAVE CONVINCED OURSELVES IT IS NONE OF OUR BUSINESS OR THAT WE CANNOT DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT ANYWAY. WE CAN CLOSE OUR EARS TO WHAT JESUS IS TRYING TO SAY TO US. LIKE THE TWO FRIENDS, ONE A SMOKER, THE OTHER NOT, WHO MEET, AND THE NON-SMOKER ASKS HIS FRIEND IF ALL THE

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REPORTS CONNECTING CANCER WITH SMOKING ARE CAUSING HIM CONCERN. THE SMOKER REPLIES, "OH NO! I'VE SOLVED THAT PROBLEM." YOU MEAN YOU'VE QUIT SMOKING?" "NO! I'VE STOPPED READING THE REPORTS."

I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU THIS MORNING, VERY BRIEFLY HOW GOD TOUCHED MY LIFE AND HOW HE CHANGED ME AND MY MINISTRY. I DON'T DO THIS VERY OFTEN AND I AM NOT QUITE CERTAIN WHY I WANTED TO SHARE WITH THIS CONGREGATION SOME OF MY LIFE'S STORY.

GOD CALLED ME TO THE PRIESTHOOD! I AM CERTAIN OF THAT. IF WE WERE IN A SMALL GROUP TOGETHER I COULD SHARE IN DEPTH WHY IT IS THAT I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT. THAT TRUTH IS, HOWEVER, THAT WHILE I BELIEVED IN GOD AND THAT JESUS WAS LORD AND THAT HE HAD TRULY CALLED ME TO THE PRIESTHOOD, MY BELIEF WAS NOT A PERSONAL BELIEF. IT WASN'T MINE. IT WAS THAT OF OTHERS. MY FATHER, MY MOTHER, MY TEACHERS, THE SAINTS OF THE PAST AS WELL AS SOME IN MY LIFE AT THE TIME WHOSE LIFE WAS A WITNESS TO THE FAITH. HOW IMPORTANT THAT KIND OF WITNESS IS. IT STRENGTHENS US, GIVES US COURAGE AND HELPS SEND US ALONG THE WAY. I REMEMBER BEFORE I WENT TO SEMINARY HOW IMPORTANT THE BIBLE WAS FOR ME AS IT WAS OPENED TO ME AS IT NEVER HAD BEEN BEFORE. BUT SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY YOU HAVE TO KNOW JESUS FOR YOURSELF. AND SOMEHOW I HAD NOT HAD THAT EXPERIENCE. SOMETHING WAS MISSING IN MY LIFE AND IN MY MINISTRY.

IN 1972, 32 YEARS AGO, I HAD A SERIOUS BACK INJURY THAT THREATENED TO INCAPACITATE ME PERMANENTLY. IN FACT AFTER 10 DAYS IN THE HOSPITAL FOR TESTS, THE DOCTORS TOLD ME THAT THERE WAS LITTLE THEY COULD DO; I HAD A CUT SHEAF IN THE NERVE AND I WOULD REMAIN PARTIALLY PARALYZED. A FRIEND ARRIVED IN THE HOSPITAL AND TOLD ME THAT SHE BELIEVED THE LORD HAD SENT HER TO LAY HANDS ON ME AND TO PRAY FOR MY HEALING. AND SHE DID!

WITHIN TWO WEEKS OF THAT TIME, I WAS COMPLETELY HEALED. I REMEMBER MY DOCTOR, WHO TOLD ME THAT HE WAS AN ATHEIST, HOLDING UP TWO XRAY'S, BEFORE AND AFTER, AND SAYING, "I DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS AT ALL. YOU'VE HAD SOME HELP FROM SOMEWHERE THAT I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT."

GOD DIDN'T STOP THERE. HE HAD MY FULL ATTENTION AND VIRGINIA AND I SORT OF FELT AS THOUGH WE WERE BEING LED AROUND BY THE NOSE ...AND THAT WENT ON FOR A FULL YEAR. IT WAS DURING THIS TIME THAT WE BOTH LEARNED THAT WE HAD A PERSONAL

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SAVIOUR IN JESUS AND EVERYTHING CHANGED IN OUR LIVES. I CAN'T SAY THAT BEFORE ALL OF THIS HAPPENED, NOTHING WAS OF VALUE IN MY MINISTRY. OF COURSE THERE WAS VALUE. BUT NOW I WAS LISTENING MORE INTENTLY AND HEARING BETTER AND UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT WAS THAT GOD WANTED ME TO DO. AND WHAT THAT WAS SIMPLY TO BE HIS SERVANT, TO PROCLAIM HIS GOOD NEWS, TO REMAIN FAITHFUL, TO SEEK AND SERVE CHRIST IN ALL PERSONS AND TO LOVE MY NEIGHBOR AS MYSELF; AND TO STRIVE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE AMONG PEOPLE AND TO RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING. DID I SAY THAT ALL HE WANTED ME TO DO WAS SIMPLE? THIS IS A LOT THAT HE IS EXPECTING.

IT IS A LOT AND IF ALL THOSE WORDS SOUND FAMILIAR IT IS BECAUSE THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT GOD EXPECTS, DEMANDS, OF US ALL. AND THOSE PARTICULAR WORDS ARE FROM YOUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT. WHAT IT WAS FOR ME IS NO DIFFERENT THEN IT IS FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE BEING CONFIRMED TODAY; AS WELL AS ALL OF YOU IN GRACE CHURCH. THOSE OF YOU WHO WILL BE COMING BEFORE THE BISHOP TO BE CONFIRMED WITH THE LAYING-ON-OF HANDS ARE PROFESSING JESUS AS LORD AND YOU ARE CALLED BY HIS NAME. IT IS ALL THERE IN YOUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT, THE AGREEMENT, THE CONTRACT, THAT WAS MADE FOR YOU AT YOUR BAPTISM. YOU ARE INDEED, IN COVENANT WITH GOD AND YOU RENEW IT TODAY AT THIS SERVICE. YOU MAKE IT REAL AND ALIVE AND ACTIVE IN YOUR LIVES RIGHT NOW AND BY ALL OF THIS YOU ARE ALLOWING GOD TO WORK IN YOUR LIVES.

THE GREAT DISCOVERY OF CHRISTIANITY IS SO SIMPLE THAT IT ALMOST ESCAPES US. IF WE WISH TO FIND GOD WE MUST FIND HIM IN THAT WHICH IS HUMAN. IF WE DO NOT FIND HIM IN EACH OTHER, WE WILL NEVER FIND HIM ANYWHERE. WE READ IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, 'IF YOU DO NOT LOVE YOUR BROTHER OR YOUR SISTER WHO YOU SEE, HOW CAN YOU LOVE GOD WHOM YOU DO NOT SEE?' THAT DOESN'T MEAN THAT WE NEVER ENTER INTO CONTROVERSY, NEVER CONFRONTING ONE ANOTHER. WE ARE NOT LIVING IN THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM YET. BUT WE DO LIVE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THE GREAT WORK OF THE SPIRIT, WHEN JESUS WALKED THE EARTH, WAS TO REVEAL THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN ORDINARY SITUATIONS. FOR THE MOST PART JESUS DID SIMPLE ORDINARY HUMAN THINGS AND YET THE PEOPLE WHO WERE WITH JESUS SENSED GOD AT WORK.

THE PARISH OF GRACE CHURCH, HADDONFIELD, IS A COMMUNITY OF ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO DO ORDINARY HUMAN THINGS. IN OTHER WORDS YOU ARE JUST LIKE ALL THE OTHER PARISHES IN THE CHURCH. OF COURSE EVERY PARISH IS UNIQUE AND DIFFERENT. BUT IN MANY WAYS WE ARE THE

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SAME. IT IS IN US, IN PEOPLE LIKE US, IN OUR HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS, IN OUR UNIONS OF LOVE, IN OUR FRIENDSHIPS, IN OUR CARING, IN OUR HONESTY, IN OUR SENSE OF JUSTICE, THAT WE MUST BOTH REVEAL GOD TO OTHERS AND AT THE SAME TIME, DISCOVER GOD FOR OURSELVES. IN THE GOSPEL ACCOUNT TODAY JESUS TELLS US THAT IT WILL NOT BE EASY AND IN FACT AT TIMES WILL BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT AND HARD. BUT HE PROMISES THAT BY YOUR ENDURANCE YOU WILL GAIN YOUR LIVES. BUT THAT MEANS YOU HAVE TO BE THE CHURCH. YOU HAVE TO LIVE YOUR FAITH EVERY DAY.

THE JEWISH PEOPLE KNEW GOD BEFORE JESUS CAME. MANY KNEW HIM INTIMATELY. MOST WORSHIPPED HIM AS TRANSCENDENT, AS THE GREAT OTHER. THAT IS, GOD OUT THERE, NOT HERE.

NO ONE COULD HAVE GUESSED THAT THIS GREAT GOD, CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, WAS TO BE FOUND IN HIS FULLNESS IN HUMAN FLESH. GOD CHOSE TO REVEAL HIMSELF FULLY IN A PERSON, IN JESUS. AND NOT JUST IN THE FEW MIRACLES THAT HE DID, BUT IN HIS EVERYDAY, ORDINARY WAY OF LIVE, OF LOVING, OF SERVING. GOD ONLY BECAME VISIBLE THROUGH JESUS' HUMANITY. GOD IS ONLY VISIBLE NOW THROUGH YOUR HUMANITY. THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD IS IN OUR DAILY, SOMETIMES BORING, SOMETIMES EXCITING EVERYDAY LIVES, REVEALING GOD TO US AND TO OTHERS; HERE IN HADDONFIELD AND WHEREVER WE GO.

SO MY FRIENDS, WE HAVE THESE ADMONITIONS, THESE WARNINGS AND WE HAVE THIS GOSPEL FROM LUKE TODAY AND WE DON'T LIKE IT. BUT JESUS SIMPLY WANTS US TO BE FAITHFUL AND TO REMAIN STEADFAST NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE CHURCH. BY YOUR ENDURANCE YOU WILL INDEED GAIN YOUR LIFE. AMEN