“Live as Children of Light”

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2020

West Auburn Congregational Church

Bill Hiss

Lectionary citations:

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is my first email-delivered, website-posted unspoken sermon.

Well, make lemonade. If we are sensibly trying to avoid most physical contact with each other, a preacher can re-wrap a message, since there is not the normal timeframe of a 9 AM service. On the other hand, don’t tax the patience and attention span of readers, who are being besieged by stunning amounts of information. So this offering is intended for a gentle, unhurried reading when you have some quiet time, or even a reading over a few separated pieces of time. A sermon with its attendant readings and quotes on the installment plan, perhaps. Read a bit and come back after a cup of coffee or a nap. Maybe better than a normal church sermon!

Pasted in below are the four lectionary texts for this week—far more important than my musings. It is a centuries-old tradition to draw lectionary texts from four portions of Scripture: Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles from St. Paul, and Gospels. Two of this week’s texts, from I Samuel and Gospel of John, are quite long, as each of them tells of an extended series of contacts. In our services, we would not normally read such a long text, and certainly not four with two long texts. But in a virtual sermon, hopefully it will work to have my comments be shorter, and the Scripture texts in their fullness. And at the very bottom, a few short quotes from other folks over the centuries—I like hearing these voices from other times and traditions; it seems a bit like having a choir of interesting, talented singers around us.

These four Scripture texts, written over many hundreds of years, have some hauntingly parallel qualities. They each try to explain, with metaphors and images, what it can mean to allow God into our lives, to trust in His light even as we feel fear or mortality, even as we experience disruption or even danger. It shows us the importance of keeping to our faith, even when powerful figures ignore or mock us. We have talked in previous weeks about Lent involving our walk with Jesus to Jerusalem. He knows where he is heading, and so do we. He knows what lies ahead, and so do we. Each of these four texts tell us (and show us in I Samuel and in John with an extended story) what it means to have God involved, both in our individual lives and in our social order. The texts give examples of how to decide to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem. They give examples of what we must expect on that journey, with fear and uncertainty on all sides. It is not easy to be alive now, with a viral disease potentially at any corner. Can these two-thousand-year texts speak to us? Can they offer support and guidance when we are worried about a pestilence, a disease for which there is no immediate solution?

Yes, they can comfort us. They assure us of God’s love. In the 23rd Psalm, perhaps one of the two or three best-loved passages in the Bible, we are told that God will walk on the journey with us. God will be like shepherd to us, if we will accept it. We will be accompanied through dark valleys, and brought to a green pasture with abundant still water. Like the anointing by Samuel of the youth who will become King David, we will be anointed with oil. We will have food and drink to sustain us, and we will live with God’s presence for our whole lives.

Samuel came to Bethlehem frightened of Saul’s reaction if it became known that a new king was being chosen—“If Saul hears of it, he will kill me,” Samuel says to God. The city elders in Bethlehem are just as frightened to see Samuel, the mighty prophet, and they came out to him trembling; “Have you come in peace?” they ask nervously. Well, yes and no. Samuel will turn expectations upside down, for he is anointing the youngest son, the shepherd youth David, as a new king of Israel. An old regime, to which people tied their expectations for stability, has been shown to be hollow. There will be stress, suffering and loss before the new order is born. In just the same way, Jesus turns the expectations of the Pharisees upside down: the man blind from birth can see, and the Pharisees, though seeing what has happened right in front of them, are blind. Like many other Biblical accounts, the Pharisees are both bewildered and threatened by this upstart who dares to heal on the Sabbath. They want their normal church services, on time, and with no disruption.

We are feeling the separation from our sanctuary, our worship, and the community of caring in our congregation. That loss is not imaginary, and we must with our efforts try to overcome it, to compensate with other forms of worship, like this “on-line” sermon or other forms of worship, communion and sharing. But we should not forget that almost all of what we have from St. Paul is due to his letters, to churches he may have visited previously, but now is pastoring by mail. He is sequestered, perhaps literally locked up, and writing from other countries. He is “working from home,” or more likely working from some remote country. I have a picture of which I am fond, of myself and my son Josh standing on the very rocky hill outside the Parthenon where St. Paul preached to the Athenians. There are very early Christian churches in Athens that are now a full story or two below the current street level, as buildings around them were demolished over the centuries and new ones built on top of the rubble of the old. But these churches are still there, honoring their heritage, still worshipping. It has been 2000 years since Paul made Athens a stop on a trip across Asia Minor: Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, Galatia, Colossae, Thessalonica. Paul tells his little fledgling church in Ephesus, “Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light…” St. Paul does not minimize the dangers of immorality around his church, but he tells them to follow the teachings he has shared, to live as children of light. “Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord,” he says. "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

So perhaps these weeks that we will be apart from each other are not very different than what the early church experienced. Ministry by mail and worship in unexpected small ways—groups of less than 10, or just the single household. We are without our lovely organ and snazzy new piano—not very different from Paul’s ministry, and the worship which those Ephesian “sleepers” had to invent on the spot in the privacy of their homes. Live as children of light, Paul tells them. So may it be for us, while we are absent, one from the other. The blessings of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be upon all of us now, and forever.

Amen.