Look and Listen, But Do Not Comprehend

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Year W ~ Isaiah 6:1-10 ~ Mark 4:1-20 ~ (translations by Dr. Wilda Gafney)

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Look to the Southwest Portico of the Jefferson Memorial. Read, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…” Turn around. In the Northeast Portico, read, referring to slavery, “I tremble for my country when I consider that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever.” To know the truth. And to live less than, contra to the truth. The physical embodiment of contradiction we see in Thomas Jefferson, in this Nation, we see also, I am sorry to say, in the Church.

During this season of Epiphany, at St. Columba’s we are engaging a womanist lectionary, bible readings that center the experience of black women and all who are marginalized. The readings have been here all along, just omitted from our usual liturgical diet. Last week, after three Sundays in a row hearing preachers who spoke truths from the margin into the center, from the pulpit... last Sunday a parishioner asked, “I wonder Ledlie what you might say?” It went without saying that her wondering was prompted by the self-evident fact that I cannot speak from the margin, any margin. You want a model of the patriarchy, you’re looking at him. Okay, I’m not tall and chiseled, but white, male, straight, product of elite education, old guard, well-resourced, well-connected.

This is holy work that we are up to, centering the voices and experience of the marginalized. Thought I, in the realm of God, there is room for us all. If I adopt a scarcity mentality of limited resources, then I might feel threatened. But if I dig a little deeper, embrace the abundance mentality evident through all of Jesus’ ministry, I trust ‘more for them doesn’t mean less for me. It simply means more of us at the table of God’s abundant love.’ This is the overarching ultimate end: God’s abundant, lavishly abundant love, embracing, nourishing each and all.

But. But, that’s not what the texts say today. No, that would be jumping all the way to the end. And we’re not at the end. We are here. We’re in the midst of it. The struggle is real. People are dying, being killed.

So, the texts today. Actually, these texts are included in our common lectionary. But our lectionary versions are edited. Isaiah, chapter six: Magnificent favorite awesome passage of the call of the prophet Isaiah – cherubim and seraphim in attendance before the majesty of God. Holy, holy, holy; it doesn’t get better than this. “Here am I, send me.” That’s where our reading usually stops, allowing us to envision the bold young prophet setting forth to proclaim the Word of God. Which indeed Isaiah shall do. But to whom and to what end? Now read: To a people who cannot hear, cannot see, cannot comprehend, and thus, cannot turn and be healed. It gets worse: you will preach destruction. Until Isaiah pleads, How long? Until cities lie waste, houses without people, the land utterly desolate; burned, until there is nothing left but the stump of a tree. God is doing this.

Then tantalizing, mysterious, the passage ends with, “the holy seed is its stump.” We’ll come back to this.

Next, Jesus’ parable of the sower. Jesus tells the crowds. Then he explains the parable to his disciples. The seed is God’s love poured out, splashed about. We in the fullness of our lives are some kind of soil – hard-pack, rocky, thorn-ridden, or rich, fertile, receptive. There’s definitely a subversive political agenda here. Jesus is speaking to peasant farmers who in the Palestine of those days, like the peasant farmers of every age, are subject to an impossible well-honed cycle of perpetual poverty, producing only enough to feed their family, pay off their master, and have just enough seed crop to do it again next year – if they’re lucky. Here, God’s abundance promises a crop thirty, sixty, one hundred fold – enough to buy your freedom, your independence. A direct threat to the man – who takes note.

But look, right in the middle of the story, Mark inserts a paraphrase of those very lines we just heard in Isaiah. All four Gospels cite this passage. We usually leave that out; it made the story a little long. Jesus was alone with some women, men, and the twelve, and he said to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the majesty of God. But for those outside, they will look but not understand; listen but not comprehend; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.” Again, there are some folks for whom God is not preparing a way.

Scholars have opined that just as God sent Isaiah to proclaim a hard message that would not be well-received (his words precede the destruction of Jerusalem), here Jesus is preparing the disciples for a similar task – “it’s tough out there.” And the Gospel writers, compiling their texts some number of decades after Jesus’ life, are similarly reassuring and emboldening their fledgling congregations. Perhaps.

Unity and abundance around the table may be the end-game, but that is not what Jesus is doing today. Jesus is setting up outsiders and insiders. And among the insiders, there may be some real inner insiders, those who can hear the code-switching, the meaning behind his words – the folks he’s really talking to while he appears to be talking to everybody.

The late great Professor Louie Crew who decades ago championed the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, trans, queer persons in the life of the Episcopal Church was fond of quoting the beatitudes, “Blessed are the meek,” said he, “for they shall inherit the truth.” Then he’d add with a twinkle, “Look out! The meek are getting ready!” That’s what I read here. You remember how Mary sang, “God has shown the strength of his arm, scattered the proud in their conceit, cast down the mighty from their thrones.” And Jesus reading in the temple at the start of his ministry, “I have come to proclaim good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, release to the captives.”

This should not come as a surprise. Jesus is not colorblind, gender blind, or any kind of blind. Or maybe to some it should and does come as a surprise because what is God doing to some of us? Dulling our senses, so we will look and listen but not comprehend. I remember when my cousin Katrina Browne first realized that we are descended from a family of slave traders, over many decades. She said, “the truth was right there, hidden in plain sight.” A truth our family opted to not comprehend. Not comprehending, we could not turn, could not be healed.

This is a hard word.

Given God’s overarching abundance of lavish love, why does God do this? At the moment, beyond waking some of us up, I do not know. And since asking *that* question of “why” doesn’t shed any light, I want to ask a different question. But I am not sure what question to ask.

Do you know?

I am not sure what to make of this. I am feeling stumped.

“The holy seed is its stump.” (?!?)

I think it will be good if I take a moment – or as long as it takes – to be quiet.

I’ve been having my say. Now is the time … well, it’s beyond the time, its late… Now is the time for me to listen. To tremble, tremble, tremble; for God is just and God’s justice cannot sleep forever.

In that silence, some of you may need to join me. I’ll leave it there.

God have mercy. God have mercy. Upon us all.