



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 6 (C)

What Do I Want This Very Minute?

[RCL] Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29 or John 5:1-9

We begin with a garden. It's no small matter that the committee who culled, edited, and arranged our anthology of sacred texts started the pages with the story of creation, of growth, of dreams. And in the final pages of our anthology, in the book of Revelation, we receive a vision of a city, equally full of trees and water and life. The tree of life, so often used as a sign of temptation and human brokenness, now becomes a tree of sustenance and unity— a new fruit each month providing nourishment, the leaves of the tree providing healing of the nations.

In between the first and last pages of our holy scriptures, between the first garden and the new city, between the tree of life as folly and the tree of life as sustenance, are dreams.

As Christians, we pray for “such good things as surpass our understanding,” we pray for the excess of our desire, we pray for faith that can move mountains. This Easter season, as is invited in every liturgical season, it might be a rewarding discipline of faith to try to believe in what we pray... to know that we can ask God for beyond that which we can understand, and to actually believe that God can deliver it.

There's a wonderful discernment exercise developed by Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, called “What do I want this very minute?” After you quiet your breath and your mind, you ask yourself this exact question— what do I want this very minute? One's responses might begin with the immediate: a snack, a nap, or a more comfortable chair. Then it might evolve into a wider view: financial stability, a body that works the way I want it to, a functional family. And perhaps what one might want this very minute will expand into the universal: for all to know love, for an end to gun violence, for reparations and restitution, for peace.

Praying for that which surpasses our understanding means praying for the things we cannot figure out ourselves. The history of humankind shows we cannot figure out power, equal distribution, love towards our neighbor. Being resurrection people, believing that death is not the last word, means we believe, truly, that God is bigger than what we can see, and that God is present in ways we cannot imagine, and that God holds us all, dreams with us, and blesses us.

May God give us a blessing. The radical nature of the psalm appointed for today is that it not only includes praise for the most divine God, but also deigns to ask for a blessing. It's both presumptuous and intimate to request a blessing from the God of the universe. Oughtn't we be content with the scraps from under thy table? Oughtn't we be pleased with whatever bounty we happen to receive? But as a child asks for more, and more, and more, we know that we can ask God for more. We can ask for what we want this very minute, and beyond. In fact, we can ask for God's blessing. This is a radical relationship with the Divine... one in which there is trust and love and respect that we can receive life, and salvation, and unending love, and still ask for more.

Blessing, of course, is not a one-way or one-sided flow. The first two lines of the psalm – “May God be merciful to us and bless us, show us the light of his countenance and come to us” – are not new to the Holy Scriptures, but reference the Aaronic blessing found in the book of Numbers. Just as the holy scriptures in our anthology play off one another, dance with one another, and inspire one another, we can be inspired to bless those around us. It was an intentional decision to choose this psalm as an option in the order of Evening Prayer– perhaps because a broken and human world always wants, this very minute, blessing.

The dangerous part of a relationship with God, of desiring that which surpasses our understanding, is that God might call us to be a blessing to the world in ways that do in fact surpass our understanding. (Do we really want to be a missionary this very minute?) Paul is called in a dream.

Paul and his companions are notorious for following the call of the Spirit when it comes to their travel itinerary. They sometimes reveal intentions, and then are called by the Spirit to go somewhere else, to take another route. As we zoom into this moment in the book of Acts, Paul is at a bit of a standstill as to where to go next, having been redirected by the Spirit a few times. And here he is called to Macedonia. As a fun fact, Macedonia is still known as the “gateway to Europe.” Until now, the gospel had been limited to Asia, but now Paul is called to take the gospel to Europe, and the western world. We may venture to guess this is the kind of dream Paul would never have asked for himself!

As Paul answers the call to “Come over to Macedonia and help us," he doesn't start a GoFundMe, doesn't collect school supplies, doesn't load up with hammers, food, clean water systems, solar panels... He comes to help not assuming what Macedonia may need. Instead, he brings the greatest gift he has, the gift he has been called to give: the Gospel of Christ. And God blesses them indeed, with Lydia and all of her gifts and generosity and leadership. The journey continues.

As we discern our own dreams– with what we are wrestling, where we are being called, for what we are yearning, what we want this very minute – we have to anticipate and expect that the blessing of God is already with us.

Blessing doesn't always look like what we want in our very first minutes— a new car, a significant other or a child, forgiveness of debt, more young families in church. But the image of blessing as found in the passage from Revelation gives us the more and more we can come to expect from a bountiful God.

The Holy City described in this apocalyptic vision doesn't have a temple, not even an ornate temple like Solomon's. Instead, God is present and praised in every room and street. There are walls and gates providing safety and comfort and enclosure, but the gates are never shut. All are welcome, and no guests are threatening. There is a river, and trees, the food and drink of life. The vision of God, the blessing of God looks like this: Safety, hospitality, sustenance, refreshment, rest, and joy. Isn't that what we all want this very minute?

Blessing doesn't always come the way we want it— Jesus had to violently die as a martyr in order to give us the gift of life and hope in resurrection. Jesus has to remind his own disciples that they themselves do not always know what is best: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I." Jesus knows what he wants this very minute, and that is to be with the Parent of the universe, fulfilling his role in the salvation of the world. The disciples know what they want this very minute, and that is to be with Christ, with the teacher, the way things are.

Even after Jesus is gone, he will remain. Even after Jesus is gone, his *blessing* will remain. He tells his disciples to keep his word: to love God, love their neighbor, and change the world. He tells his disciples the Spirit will always be among them. And he tells his disciples that he blesses them. Shalom, peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

Shalom. Peace. God's blessing. What more could we want, this very minute?

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