

Last Sunday after Pentecost Year A

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Growing up, one of my favorite things to do was to go to my Grandparents house. They lived on a small farm on the outskirts of Lahore. We would drive for what seemed like hours to my calculations to get there. Once there I was free to run around, gathering wild mulberries and climbing the guava tree for its striking fruit. My grandfather always kept various animals at the farm: chickens, a hostile goat and even a peacock.

One day, I was incredibly eager to feed the chickens. I opened the gate to the chicken coup and went ahead of my grandfather. I must have been five at the time. Instantly, the rooster, sensing a threat, puffed his chest and got ready to attack. Before he could do any real harm to me, my grandfather swooped me up and took me to safety. What little transpired between the territorial rooster and I was still too traumatic for my young self. I ran to my mom wailing in her arms that the rooster attacked me. Looking back, I do not even think he got a peck at me. But by lunchtime I had calmed down enough to tell various family members my riveting tale of being attacked and how my heroic grandfather stopped the menacing rooster. At lunch I found out that soon after the encounter, my grandfather had butchered the chicken and we were having it for lunch. Furthermore, I got to eat its neck and heart... I guess to show our shared dominance over the beast.

That rooster was not the only villain on the farm. My grandparents had a goat that we were not allowed to go near since she was prone to ram people for no reason. She had injured my uncles on multiple occasions. One time though, I got to go near her as she was being milked. I got to pet her coarse hair and drink some of her milk. Pro tip, petting a goat while it is being milked is not something I would recommend. My glass had countless goat hairs in it. Needless to say, it was the first and last time I ever drank goat milk.

In our Old Testament and Gospel readings, we encounter animals, sheep, and goats. In both there is a separation happening, sheep from sheep and sheep from goats. This separation does sound a little troubling. It is scary to be subject to judgment like that.

Although I do not think that divine punishment is the goal in our readings. Ezekiel largely prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. He hears from God what to prophesy. But if we take a step back, the prophecy is to rulers, to the shepherds of the sheep, not the sheep themselves. Ezekiel often calls out the rulers' erroneous leadership. This passage too is from a larger word of God detailing the wrong, political and religious leaders have committed towards the people. Ezekiel uses the analogy of shepherds and sheep to refer to their political climate. The shepherds represent the leadership and the sheep those the authority is oppressing. Not only does this analogy work as a suitable representation of the

relationship between oppressed and oppressors but it translates well for the herding society.

Jesus uses the same analogy to refer to the matching mistreatment in the parable we heard today. Parables, as Abbott noted last week, do not always have a one to one correlation. They cannot be interpreted logically rather; they leave the listener with a visceral reaction. Jesus calls for a separation, not of people but of right and wrong. Parting what should and should not be done. He goes further to explain the right and wrong: care or neglect. Nourishment and compassion is what care entails. Through this parable, we are able to feel the Messianic mandate for compassion as we hear God taking the place of the neglected in our world; “just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me”.

Even though we live in a vastly different society than the ancient near east. The analogy still remains moving. The mistreatment by those in power still gives a visceral reaction. Unfortunately, those in power still use it to harm those without. I am sure we can think of many examples. Every time we listen to the news, we hear examples of it. And it can be so easy to wallow in these power imbalances and be paralyzed by the hopelessness of it all. But the prophesy of Ezekiel moves us further.

In Ezekiel we hear what God’s plan is. God hears the people. God responds. God does this by physically gathering the sheep. Nurturing them, feeding them and binding up their wounds. At the end of it all, God is with them.

God steps in because the shepherds have not done their job. They have not kept the people safe. The sheep have been wandering alone, while the shepherds feast on them. The world unfortunately is not working out the way it is supposed to. Nothing but theocratic rule, God with us, can affectively bring peace to the sheep.

The prophecy is not about judgment, but rather, there is a right and wrong. The wrong is neglect of God’s people. The right is care for the people. God’s promise is this: God sees the wrong. God will right the wrongs. That is our core hope in God and our hope for the world; that things would be made right.

Although that hope seems further away today then in the time of Ezekiel. Although many have gone before God has made their hope for a better world a reality. Although many evil acts are never made right or can be made right. The same atrocities seem to recycle through history over and over again.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writes on this saying, “Life seems to have a fatal flaw, and history seems to have an irrational and unpredictable streak. Ultimately we all die not having received what was promised. Our dreams are constantly tossed and blown by staggering winds of disappointment. Mahatma Gandhi, after long years of struggle for independence, dreamed of a united India, only to see that dream trampled over by a bloody religious war between the Hindus and the Moslems, which led to the division of India and Pakistan. The Negro slaves of

America longed for freedom with all their passionate endeavors, but many died without receiving it. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup might pass, but he had to drink it to the last bitter dregs. The Apostle Paul prayed fervently for the “thorn” to be removed from his flesh, but he went to his grave with this desire unfulfilled. Shattered dreams! Blasted hopes! This is life.”

So we stand at a paradox today. We have a beautiful promise from God of justice. Yet our world is as unjust as ever. It is the same world of Dr. King, of Gandhi, of Ezekiel and of Jesus. Those who saw the world for what it was and also had the vision of what it could be. They saw the pain of the neglected yet had visions of, as John put it, God wiping every tear from our eyes. Of death being no more; mourning and crying and pain being no more.

Allow me to share a vision with you. Perhaps you might have to suspend your disbelief. But when I was young and going through a rough patch at home and at school, I had a vision. I was sleeping and had this dream. I was lying down in my room engrossed in my sphere, occupied within my world when suddenly I was being lifted up. Through roof of my house and up higher. The earth, the clouds and the stars started whizzing by. Higher still I went through the colorful nebulous space. And suddenly everything became still. And there was a voice, resounding from everything around me. God-everything spoke and said, “It will be okay, I am with you”. Moments later, I was falling, seeing everything I had seen on the way up, in reverse. And I was awake. Shaken.

I do not really know if that was a vision from God or not. But I do think those words are the only way we can live fully in paradox of this world. “It is okay, God is with us”. That is the courage we are given. Many times though, it is not enough. Many times, we are still broken down. I know I am. Yet the peace that comes from knowing God is present, can give us the redemption to move. It is the catalyst we need to work towards the vision God has given us: to seek redemptive justice in the world, as only that which can come from God acting in the world. Making peace with the bad and moving towards the good. Of seeing the least of these being mistreated and having the courage to do something about it. Dr. King, Gandhi, Ezekiel and countless others saw the world for what it was and tried to move the world closer to the promise of what it could be. And they did bring the Kingdom forward. Let us have the hope, alongside God with us, to move us closer to the vision.

Let it be so.