

**Sermon Notes for the Proper 28
Sunday, November 14th, 2010**

Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

It is getting late in the church year – as a matter of fact, next Sunday is the last in the church calendar before we turn to Advent. And this is the time of the church year when our scripture readings turn to what might best be described as “Scary Jesus.” He’s scary because he’s promising upset and upheaval, uncertainty – even persecution, degradation, and hints at death.

We’re struck today with the seeming contradictions of a promise of peace – radical peace in a new creation molded by God’s loving hands in Isaiah; this versus Jesus cautioning a questioning audience and his followers about the trouble to come: wars, insurrections, sell-outs, betrayal.

Curiously, both lessons hinge on the holy mountain – the center of the Jewish faith. For Isaiah, Mount Zion represents the beginning of the new creation, the promise of the Temple in Jerusalem for a new peace on earth. In Jesus’ day, long after the Temple had been rebuilt, centuries after the author of Isaiah had penned these words, the Temple is meant to reflect Isaiah’s vision, and so the people are admiring it. God’s kingdom has arrived perhaps. The new world has begun right here and right now.

Not so fast, Jesus seems to say, and then he discloses the discomfort everyone is feeling under Roman occupation, intra-sectarian strife among the faithful, and the dread of siege for a little known band of folk following this itinerant teacher, healer, prophet, and maybe Messiah from Nazareth. It’s not so much unlike our world as we would like to believe, with everything that gnaws at us these days. And even in the Land of the Free, we Christians are struggling, too, to find the in-breaking of the promise of Isaiah. . .and sometimes we are tempted to suppose we have already established it. Jesus shakes his head at us this morning for our presumption. Christ warns us that the moment we think we’ve got it, we’re bound to lose it – whatever “it” might happen to be at the moment.

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Yesterday, a scant handful attended the Marin Deanery meeting. Many of you probably have never heard of the Deanery. You know about the parish, for sure, and you’ve probably heard something about the Diocese. We all love Grace Cathedral and then there’s the guy with the pointy hat who comes a-visiting on occasion. But the Deanery? It encompasses all of Episcopal congregations in Marin County with the hope – sometimes it feels like a vain one – of shared ministry in a similar context. Our last deanery meeting of the year was yesterday at St. Francis’,

Novato, and coming to see us was Rev. Paul Gaffney. He's a Disciples of Christ pastor who has served for the past seven years as the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplain.

Now the agreement was Paul was to speak with us for, say, five to ten minutes. We spoke together with him for forty-five! He spends much of his time in San Rafael on the streets, being present with people who have lost everything and are homeless. Sometimes he can help them find the right services. Often he can't. He has no brilliant answers or wisdom, only his presence, his love, and willingness to witness to the rest of us about the plight of those whom we often prefer to remain invisible.

Recently, Paul has been working with our sister parish, St. John's, Ross, on an almost foolhardy—in the eyes of the world at least – project. St. John's wants a city permit to host a homeless winter shelter. That's right. In Ross. Many of you know, and the rest of you can imagine just how well that's gone over. There have been threats. There has been a whisper campaign. The law books are being opened. Lawyers are rattling their legal sabers. The Temple is threatened, it seems, and not just a beautiful parish facility like St. John's, but the whole Temple of affluence. As one member of St. John's puts it, the hardest thing of all to handle is the entitled sense that people moved to Ross – some moved to Marin – to escape *all that*. Haven't we *earned* the right to move out of the city where all *those people* hang out? Aren't services better there for the homeless and the impoverished? So St. John's courageous strategy at the present time is shifting from a head-on to a more sideways approach, and the permit-seeking process has been temporarily suspended in the name of more spadework in the wider community to dispel mis-information.

Every week, Paul gets together with homeless people he ministers with, and they talk over coffee. It's their coffee hour, you might say, without the walls and the facilities and the overhead. Paul says he was feeling particularly filled with righteous indignation and the huge amount of resistance St. John's is encountering in Ross, and so at one of these coffee sessions, he let his homeless congregation know it. Everything from "not-in-my-backyard" to ADA requirements seemed arrayed against St. John's hosting the winter homeless shelter. So, who does the homeless person sue when the hill she's living on isn't ADA compliant? When the park bench makes it difficult to get up? When the dumpster lid that promises access to a tattered cast-off or a few cans for change is too heavy to lift? Winter is coming. The rains and cold are already upon us. And so we rightly cheer Paul, St. John's, and their leadership and everyone struggling against the greater pressure to bury the homeless in societal silence and ignorance.

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Jesus says to the people admiring the Temple,

"As for these things that you see,
the days will come

when not one stone will be left upon another;
all will be thrown down.”

But maybe not in the way we think. It’s easy when confronted with deep-seated societal fear to get righteous, as we good liberals can. It’s easy when confronted with hardship and need to get cautious and protective, as we good conservatives can.

The incredible image of the lion eating straw like an ox, of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, and the dangers of persecution that come with ushering in this vision, of working alongside God to make it reality, demands more of us than righteous anger. Jesus tells us, his followers, to remain open to the Spirit. Being prepared for anything and everything is like building yet another Temple – what a beautiful plan! But it won’t work. There will be wars and insurrections. We live in unsettled times. Even this parish home is fragile and fleeting. Even as we steward these facilities, we know an earthquake or another bad economic dip can put it all at risk.

This is true in our own lives as well. We all know we are at risk at some level, whether our job is threatened, the roof springs a leak, or illness strikes. Our carefully built edifices – our temples – could be thrown down at any time. Maybe by God. Maybe by nature. Maybe by the decay of time. Maybe the real threat about those who are at the bottom economically is they remind us of this risk.

One of the homeless interrupted Paul’s righteous indignation. “But Paul,” he said, “When have *you* welcomed a homeless person into your home for shelter?”

Paul was speechless. Like everyone else, myself included, Paul was tempted to launch into a litany of answers – boundaries, family needs, space, liability, lease agreements. . . just like the town of Ross, Paul had every legal reason to not host a homeless person in his home. It is one thing to spend much of his waking hours out on the streets with the “least of these.” It is another to invite one them into his private abode, into his most intimate life.

All of us who have children remember what happened when they first came into our lives. Our carefully structured days, our plans for achievement, even our careers and the peaceful temples of our hearts, were overturned. Not one stone was left upon another. The same is true whenever we’ve let in someone into our inner abode, into our intimate lives, into our carefully structured days and well-negotiated and carefully guarded boundaries. It can be a significant other. It can be a friend. It can be a pet. It can be a stranger or a co-worker. Sooner or later, we are going to be broken down – even those of us who serve regularly and pour passion and deep conviction into supporting and advocating for the marginalized are bound to be caught short at some point.

Maybe the reality for St. John’s, Ross, and all of us who want to see them succeed is not about winning or losing the permit. It’s about the relationships that are shifting, the carefully managed

structures of understanding and assumption that are now eroding in the midst of fear, hope, anger, love, passion, and the cry of need. The Temple of what we always thought *should* be as good liberals, good conservatives, good run-in-the-middle-love-everyone folk – is crumbling all around us. In its place is arising the Kingdom of God, which is ushered in by odd fits and starts, strange images, and contradictions. When we cry peace, there is war on the horizon. When we break out of swords both literal and metaphorical, peace breaks out. When we have a plan, the ground shifts. Spiritual earthquakes abound. And Jesus says, this is only the beginning.

What we need is what Ross needs, what Mill Valley needs, what Marin needs, and that is a complete top-to-bottom transformation by relationship – most of all with those whom we are least able to see. Maybe they don't simply want a hand out, or our noble protection, or even our most passionate advocacy. Maybe they simply want *relationship*, like our God wants *relationship*, so much more than carefully constructed edifices and assiduously managed plans. Those hold God at bay – keep our loving Creator at arm's length. God is safer that way. But Christianity isn't about *safety*, it's about something else all together.

After seven years, our beloved companion in ministry Paul declares he's still learning about the people he's most committed to serving. . . and he's learning about himself. We're all learning with him – about what it means not to put our trust in our Temples, both inner and outer, both imagined and tangible. They get in the way of the vision of Isaiah, the promise of the Kingdom. What we need instead is a new birth – but. . .oh yes. . . that's still a month away. Or is it?

It's here, in the broken bread and the listening to a capricious Spirit that is at the helm even in the midst of uncertainty and the in-breaking chaos. God is with us, most of all in the throes of death, just as God was with our spiritual ancestors and our sisters and brothers today facing persecution. And what news more than that threatens to undo our best plans. . .so that we are undone. . .and then open for Life itself?

After all the Fall of the Temple – whatever form it takes for us these days – is not a sign of our failure as much as a sign that we are not in charge. God is. And that's not just news to undo our best laid plans and efforts and our ever-present righteous indignation, but news to remake the entire world.