



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 26, 2020
ISAIAH 9:1-4; PSALM 27: 1, 5-13; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-18; MATTHEW 4:12-23

LOVE WINS

Matthew 4:12-23 [*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.]*

Many of you have told me that this has been an especially hard week and I hold that with you. I will tell you that this is an especially hard sermon, but I promise to preach good news before I quit. I want to use the hymn we've just sang before the Gospel: Hymn 661 as a backdrop for this sermon—*They cast their nets in Galilee just off the hills of brown...* one of my favorite hymns. It lands in our annual liturgical orbit about this time every year, as we hear the stories of Jesus calling his first disciples. Today it is the first four

“happy simple fisherfolk” is the way the hymn says it—Peter and Andrew, James and John—who answer the call, filling their hearts with the peace of God, brimful and broken too.

The hymn was actually a poem first, published by William Alexander Percy in 1924, nearly a century ago; it would become hymn lyrics in 1941 as this nation entered into the Second World War. Congregations such as this one have been singing it ever since about this time of year, it is a melodious if mournful tune that captures

much of the human spirit's capacity to hold the weight of life's vicissitudes, especially when we are able to connect ourselves to something larger in meaning.

Now it's weeks like the one just ending that serve as portals into the soulful landscape in which this hymn moves—a holy and haunted landscape that hangs heavy with uncertainty, when life throws us curve balls.

Yes folks, it's been a hard week. Hateful graffiti on the cathedral façade; senseless gun violence in downtown Seattle that appears to be the result of a gang-related dispute; a Senate trial in which it seems everyone involved wants Lady Justice to set down her scales, remove her blindfold, and take her place in a political circus instead. It's all a bit much, but here is what I would suggest to you—these things are all interconnected.

Our hearts break under the weight of it all. But I think this hymn can help us make sense of things and connect us to a deeper narrative...

So first, a bit more about the poet: Will Percy was from Mississippi, my haunts back south, he graduated from Sewanee—that's a fine school by the way—and then went on to Harvard Law School before returning to his hometown of Greenville, Mississippi, a river town on the Mississippi. He was a farmer, lawyer, civic leader, a man of letters. His life was complicated. He never married, he was likely gay at a time and a place where he couldn't come out; he knew the privilege of a gentrified life, but also the pain of a

life filled with too much tragedy. A heart brimful and broken too.

His politics aligned with those of his father who served as a US Senator from the state of Mississippi in the early 20th century. And there and then his father stood courageously to fight for the rights of African Americans in his state still suffering a half century after being emancipated. His father stood against the Ku Klux Klan and the leaders of his own political party, at a time when doing so meant sure defeat at the polls. But he did so with moral courage, and his son, Will Percy stood with him.

What would more of our leaders today, on both sides of the aisle, set aside their personal and political aspirations and partisan righteousness and answer the true call of public servanthood, *"in order to form a more perfect Union!"*

A seminal event in Will Percy's life occurred in 1927 when the worst flood in US history eroded through several levees freeing the mighty Mississippi to unleash a watery chaos on a swath of humanity who lost homes and livelihoods. Everything. Several hundred died. Several hundred thousand would be displaced by the river's swollen current which spread 80 miles wide in some places that spring.

Will Percy, because of his politics, was placed in charge of Greenville's relief efforts in the wake of the flood. That effort included helping rescue more than 200,000 African American sharecroppers who lost everything. He didn't do it with a full measure of grace. But what we know

is that many of those who were in that plight, clinging to the sod on the levees that still stood. Many took boats upriver in the first wave of the Great Northern Migration to the urban centers of mid-America. It was a modern-day Exodus that would later include post-war Seattle.ⁱ

Perhaps some found a better life, but we know they also found the racial contempt and economic disparities from which they fled were in the North and West as well. It was not to be the Promised Land that they had hoped for, and here's what I have to say today, folks, the gang-related violence at Third and Pine this week that left one dead and seven wounded has roots that can be traced to those social ills of racial inequality that we have not yet adequately addressed as a nation, or as a city. Nor do I think such violence will cease until we move beyond superficial fixes of increased police patrols or superficial legislation. It will not cease until we have the courage to engage the work of racial reconciliation deliberately and atone for the sin of racism that still haunts the red-lined landscape in which we live.

What I hope you hear in all this is a web of connection that weaves past and present together, and an uncertain future. Yes, an uncertain future, but with a trajectory to it because we as people of faith claim in hopeful courage, it is a trajectory that bends toward justice, God's justice, and we are invited to make the journey there. It is a journey in which Jesus shows up, time and again, across the course of history, across the history of our broken

humanity, and calls to us time and again, saying "Follow me... Follow me."

We may think of fishing today as a peace-filled leisure, a recreational pastime, but true fisherfolk know that this is hard work precisely because it is filled with uncertainty. Random weather, equipment failures and constant repairs, the vagaries of where the fish might be on any given day... And for all those reasons, it is a powerful metaphor for us as we plot a course through life's waters, striving to keep our bearings, sometimes losing them amidst the waves of chaos and disillusion and fear that crash into our lives at any given moment, and we know we cannot control that in any definitive way, and yet, Jesus calls to us to follow him, simple fisherfolk we are, joining those first ones—Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the countless throngs who have followed since, as we search for the marvelous peace of God. The peace of God that filled those first disciples' hearts, brimful and broke them too. The poem goes on:

*Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
Homeless, in Patmos died.*

*Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head-down was crucified.*

*This peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod.*

*The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod...*

There is little in life that we can really depend on with any measure of certainty, and the ways of the world may bring strife to our threshold, may even bring hateful messages to our front door, but we press on. We press on because this is who

we are, this is who we truly are, this is our calling, to stand with this Jesus of love. To live and die with Jesus who was willing to die for us, for all humanity, for all creation, that we might discover a different way to live, not by sword, or vengeance, or hatred, or retribution, but by a cruciform commitment to love our neighbors—every last one of them, and to hold fast to a hope for God’s peace even when to do so feels like strife closed in the sod.

*The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod,
But let us pray for but one thing:
The marvelous peace of God.ⁱⁱ*

This way of life we choose when we follow Jesus is not always easy, but on this occasion of the Annual Parish Meeting, when we come together and we claim to be a community with special intention, let me say I am glad you are here, I am glad we are making our way together. I am glad that you and I are here together in this community, as we strive for God’s justice and peace for the whole world, and make no mistake,

this message is for the whole world even when some in that world will reject it, call us idiots, the Gospel is foolishness for some. We know that the haunted landscape of humanity is holy too, and therefore everyone is worthy of our love. Why? Because God loves the whole lot of us, steadfastly, and in the end, my friends, this is the good news, love wins.

Did you see the banner? Love wins. Can I hear you say it? Love wins. Not as victory over the other, that’s not love. Love wins as the consummate and prevailing peace of God offered to us and all as healing balm after the last battle, the last disagreement, the last vestige of disparity and inequality evaporates off the broken brow of humanity, and love pervades a new creation—a Christ-haunted landscape. A new creation into which all are invited.

So my friends today, Jesus is calling us, you and me, follow me to that new creation. Follow me to the place where love wins. Follow me... follow me...

Here is the full poem, *His Peace*, published in *Enzio’s Kingdom and Other Poems* in 1924 by William Alexander Percy. The first verse is not part of the hymn setting.

I love to think of them at dawn
Beneath the frail pink sky,
Casting their nets in Galilee
And fish-hawks circling by.
Casting their nets in Galilee
Just off the hills of brown
Such happy, simple fisherfolk
Before the Lord came down.

Contented, peaceful fishermen,
Before they ever knew
The peace of God that filled their
hearts
Brimful and broke them too.
Young John who trimmed the
flapping sail
Homeless in Patmos died.

Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head down was crucified.
The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife sowed in the sod.
Yet brothers pray for but one thing -
The marvelous peace of God!

ⁱ His memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* includes considerable account of this effort, and while his paternalistic and pejorative tone used with and about African Americans rings hollow today, he was a courageous leader who did seek to help alleviate their suffering. Which is to say, Will Percy was a complicated man.

ⁱⁱ This verse in the original poem said “Yet brothers pray for but one thing...” It’s been revised in modernity.