**25 Pentecost**

**November 15, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

In today’s reading from Mark’s gospel Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem and the disciples are admiring the Temple. One of them commented on the beautiful stones and fine buildings dedicated to God, but Jesus’ response is that there will be a time when “not one stone will be left upon another.” Then Jesus admonishes his disciples not to be “led astray.” Jesus then goes on to speak of wars, and rumors of wars, about nations against nations, and earthquakes, and famines. Yet, in the end, Jesus says, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

When I read these words this week I was struck by how timely they sounded. The civil war in Syria, and the rise of ISIS in Iraq and other parts of the Middle-East, the refugees risking their lives to be ferried across the Mediterranean fleeing the destruction of their homes, businesses, and livelihoods, and now the horrific attack by terrorist in Paris. In Jesus’ words I hear a description of the world that we know today. Yet, in the end, Jesus says, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

But “wars and rumors of wars” are not just about out there in the global arena. Sometimes they happen in our own backyard, or in our own households. Those “wars and rumors of wars,” and the “famines and earthquakes” that Jesus spoke about to his disciples were not just outer-worldly events that happened 2,000 year ago, or even today. The “wars and rumors of wars” can also be seen as metaphors for the disagreements and conflicts that happen in families and relationships; “famines” are another way of looking at the deep spiritual hunger we often experience in our lives; and “earthquakes” happen anytime the ground under our feet begins to shake … literally or metaphorically. But how, you might ask, is this like “the beginning of birth pangs?”

Sometimes those “wars and rumors of wars” happen under the roof of a church, as they did at St. Cyprian’s nine years ago. Much of my career has been working in congregations where people were split into warring factions. And interestingly and coincidentally it was nine years ago next week that this church felt its own earthquake … the ground metaphorically shook under the feet of the congregation when a large group left the Episcopal Church … and thus St. Cyprian’s ... accusing the Episcopal Church of trying to lead them astray with false teachings.

This present congregation … you who are here today … this congregation was born out of a very difficult time in the life of this parish. And I imagine there were many, including some of those who left, who expected the church to close its doors in the aftermath. But they neglected one thing … God can do more for us than we can ever ask or imagine. Within days of the split Pastor Deena Galantowicz stepped in to bring order to the chaos; to bring healing to broken spirits; and to rally the remnant to face the challenges ahead.

This deciding moment in the life of St. Cyprian’s may have felt like an earthquake at the time … I’m sure it must have felt like war. However, Jesus last words on the subject are “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” And, in fact, it has birthed us … the present congregation of St. Cyprian’s … into a new and abundant life in which the past is just the past.

This summer’s General Convention of the Episcopal Church elected Michael Bruce Curry as our new Presiding Bishop to succeed Katharine Jefferts Schori. Jefferts Schori’s election 12 years ago was a surprise to many … the first woman in that position just a few decades away from the fight over women’s ordination in our church. Michael Curry’s election, on the other hand, was expected by most and he is the Episcopal Church’s first African American in the role of Presiding Bishop. Bishop Curry was installed as Presiding Bishop at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. just a few weeks ago.

In some recent readings I came across a reflection by Jefferts Schori at the end of her time as Presiding Bishop. She acknowledged the many challenges that all of us face: as citizens of this global community; as Christians in a divided world; as Episcopalians still torn by dissent on such issues as a liturgy for same-sex marriages; and as people of faith challenged by the realities of congregational life.

Bishop Jefferts Schori’s wrote: “Christ invites us to use our struggles, our pain, our anxiety and frustration, our most profound weaknesses and limitations as pathways to lead us to deeper and more practical dependence on God and God’s guidance.”

St. Cyprian’s has a strong identity as a progressive, inclusive, and welcoming congregation. In the seven short years that I have served you as your priest I have been extremely impressed by the faith, enthusiasm, spiritual energy, creativity, commitment, and amazing resources in this congregation. You, the people of St. Cyprian’s, show that faith, enthusiasm, and commitment in the way you live your lives and contribute your time, your skills, your experiences, and your material resources to support our communal life. In fact, it seems to me, that you exhibit a faith that could only come from personal experiences in your own lives of metaphorical “wars and rumors of wars,” and “earthquakes” and “famines.” Your personal faith has been built upon those difficult times you have known in your own lives. And, it seems to me, you also learned that those difficult times were, indeed, the beginnings of birth pangs for a new life.

This present congregation was born out of a very difficult time in the life of St. Cyprian’s. Yet, I believe strongly that when the spirit of a congregation is focused in a broadly-based and commonly-held mission and vision then all its efforts are focused towards a shared goal. When there is a clear mission and vision people are affirmed in their ministry and faith, trust is built, and confidence is nurtured.

Whatever “wars and rumors of wars” that we have known, and however you have experienced “famine,” and the shaking of the ground under our feet, the fact is that the spirit of St. Cyprian’s has survived, and a new spirit of community has been birthed to life. Not only have we endured already, but our faith looks to the future with hope. It is a testimony to the power of God in your lives.

We live in a world not too dissimilar from Jesus. Wars and rumors of wars, famines surround us, earthquakes not only on a global and literal level, but at a personally and metaphorical level as well. These are opportunities to testify to our faith in a loving and redeeming God. These are times to endure and to gain our life and soul. These are times to explore God’s invitation to us to take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

I would like to add to this sermon a reflection on the first few lines of today’s reading from Mark, and how it is related to recent events here at St. Cyprian’s. As the disciples look at the magnificent buildings Jesus says that the Temple will be destroyed, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Some people choose to read this as Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 of the Common Era. However, most New Testament scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was written after the Roman siege and the prediction was therefore written backwards into the account. That is, the writer of Mark’s gospel had witnessed the destruction of the Temple, and thus put the prediction of the event on the lips of Jesus.

In either case, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem is an historical event. Not one stone was left upon another … except at the very base of the Western Wall at the level of the foundation.

If you will remember, the first Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed 600 years before Jesus by the Babylonians. This Temple that existed in the time of Jesus is called the Second Temple. It was completed by Herod the Great in 19 BCE. In Herod’s building the original, natural and irregular-shaped Temple Mount was extended to allow for an even larger Temple compound to be built at its top. This process enclosed the Temple Mount with an almost rectangular set of retaining walls, and of the four retaining walls, the western one is considered to be closest to the former Temple, which makes it the most sacred site recognized in Judaism. Most of the stones in this retaining wall weigh between 2 and 8 tons each, but others weigh even more, with one extraordinary stone weighs approximately 570 tons. The Temple was torn down by the Roman army in the year 70 of the Common Era, but this Western Wall still remains … and this is the inspiration for the Prayer Wall on our Commons. The Western Wall is where devout Jews and people of other faiths go to pray, and prayers written on small pieces of paper, are inserted in the crevices between the stones. I find it a synchronistic blessing that we are given this lesson to read right after the completion of our Prayer Wall. And, thank God that none of our stones weighed more than 65 lbs.

I will end with the quote from Bishop Jefferts Schori’s: “Christ invites us to use our struggles, our pain, our anxiety and frustration, our most profound weaknesses and limitations as pathways to lead us to deeper and more practical dependence on God and God’s guidance.”

I believe Bishop Jefferts Schori’s words are true in our personal lives. I certainly hope and pray they are true in our global experience. And I certainly believe Bishop Jefferts Schori’s words to be true in our corporate life in this congregation known as St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church.

Amen.