**26 Pentecost**

**Stewardship Sermon**

**November 17, 2013**

**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.**

Today is the 26th Sunday of our Pentecost season. In the Roman Catholic Church this is called “ordinary time.” Twenty-six weeks … that is half a year in “ordinary time.” However, considering recent events, this “time” is anything but “ordinary.” I find it interesting that our lessons this morning reflect that.

Today, near the end of “ordinary time,” we hear an apocalyptic message:

*When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.*

And Jesus went on to say:

*You will be betrayed … But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

On this Sunday after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States many of us feel betrayed. And we, in this age, know about “wars and insurrections” … just look to Syria and ISIS. We know about nations rising against nations … just look to the Korean peninsula. We know about earthquakes, and famines and plagues … just look at the destruction in our backyard from Hurricane Matthew.

But this morning we also hear from the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people about their return to their holy city, Jerusalem, after their exile in Babylon. The images shout out:

* *“new heavens and a new earth;”*
* *“create Jerusalem as a joy, and her people as a delight.”*
* *“No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the sounds of distress.”*
* *“[My people] shall build houses and inhabit them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”*

For me, these images … from both Luke and Isaiah … ring true for us today. As a nation we anxiously face the high uncertainty of how our new president … with no experience in an elected office … will manage the leadership of a complex government system. We don’t know how the xenophobic, misogynistic, and racist rhetoric of the campaign will translate into policy, or even the culture of our society. However, although Luke speaks an apocalyptic message, Isaiah gives us hope. No doubt what we will see in the next few years is something very different than the status quo. Whether this will create a “new Jerusalem” … or Washington … “as a joy, and her people as a delight” is yet to be seen. But we can only hope, and do our part in this little corner of God’s vineyard to hold true to the values that bring us together week after week … values that have been given us by our past, and which we stewards for future generations in this place.

You see, I believe these images from Luke and Isaiah ring true for our nation, our state, our city, and even for this community of St. Cyprian’s. Ten years ago next Sunday … Christ the King Sunday … Fr. David Allert stood in this pulpit and told the congregation that they were leaving the Episcopal Church … betraying his bishop and his ordination vows. Dr. Dorothy Headley Israel courageously stood up and spoke to why the congregation SHOULD NOT disassociate themselves from the Episcopal Church. Six people stood by her side as the rest of the congregation followed Fr. Allert out the door. From that small group … that faithful remnant of committed persons, St. Cyprian’s has grown to be the congregation we are today. That St. Cyprian’s is as vibrant as it is today is the result of the commitment of its people to a vision of living beyond survival. In the words of Jesus:

*You will be betrayed … But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

Our core values, mission, and vision … grounded in our past … speak of both the reality with which we live in this community at present, and with our dreams for the future. The commitment of the people of this congregation in the gifts of their time, talent and treasure have shown that we are more than able to meet any challenges we have to face.

So, on this 26th Sunday of our Pentecost Season … the Sunday following the presidential election while living in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew … and a week away from Christ the King Sunday, and the end of “ordinary time” … I’m going to make an abrupt turn. You see, this is really a stewardship sermon. It is about the faithful commitment of the people of St. Cyprian’s … past, present and future.

First, about our finances: Our annual Operating Budget for this year … 2016 … is roughly $140,000. This Budget is supported by the pledges of members of the congregation … $110,000; our Sunday plate offerings is roughly $18,000+; and $12,000 come from fees for and other miscellaneous income. We anticipate that our 2017 Operating Budget will be very similar to 2016 Operating Budget.

I often speak of the growth in numbers, ministry and spirit that we have experienced here at St. Cyprian’s. I also speak about God’s currency of compassion and love. However, a sign of the growth of spirit, enthusiasm, and commitment in this parish can be seen in the way our financial picture has improved over the last decade … using the currency of the world. In 2008 the pledges of members of the congregation for support of the church were only $26,750. By 2013 they had reached to over $95,000. And in 2013 we also embarked upon The Commons project. Our goal was to raise $75,000 and we ended up raised over $120,000. And since 2013 the committed support of the people of St. Cyprian’s has continued to increase. If ever there were evidence of the vitality, spirit and commitment of the people of this congregation I think these figures testify to it! There is nothing ordinary about that.

One hundred and sixteen years ago this building was built by craftsmen who were also building the grand hotels downtown. Most of those craftsmen who constructed this church were black, and I imagine that 35 years after the end of the Civil War that some of those craftsmen had been born into slavery and were now free.

The first clergy to lead St. Cyprian’s on a full time basis was the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey who served this congregation from 1901 until his death in 1917. This was the final chapter is a storied career for Rev. Cassey who was born into a family of prominent abolitionists from Philadelphia. His uncle was the first black priest in the Diocese of New York. Rev. Cassey’s early work was in San Jose, California where he started a school for blacks, native Americans, and Chinese children who were not included in public education. He started an Episcopal church in San Jose … later named St. Cyprian’s, and following his wife’s death he moved to New Bern, North Carolina where he served another St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church. He finally moved to North Florida, and eventually came to St. Augustine to serve this congregation of St. Cyprian’s.

At the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in the summer of 2015 the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, along with his wife, were included in the Church’s calendar of Holy Women, Holy Men … and his feast day is April 17. This year, 2016, is the 150th anniversary of Rev. Cassey’s ordination as the first black to be ordained west of the Mississippi. And 2017 will the 100th anniversary of Rev. Cassey’s death … he is buried in Evergreen Cemetery here in St. Augustine. I should note that Rev. Cassey had been ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church, but he was never ordained a priest … not because he wasn’t qualified, but because of the Jim Crow culture that permeated even the Episcopal Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

 The core values Rev. Cassey instilled in the congregation of St. Cyprian’s in those early years of the 20th Century are the same values we live with today over 100 years later … inclusion of those society has marginalized … treating others the way we want to be treated … and a deep faith in taking seriously what Jesus took seriously … a deep faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

It seems more than appropriate to honor the legacy of the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, and in 2017 we will do just that. As I mentioned, his feast day is April 17. However, April 17, 2017 is Easter Sunday. So our plan is to celebrate Rev. Cassey’s legacy on the following Sunday, April 24 … Rev. Cassey’s legacy to St. Cyprian’s, this neighborhood of Lincolnville, the City of St. Augustine, the Diocese of Florida, and the whole Episcopal Church. We have invited Bishop Howard, and we have requested Bishop Howard to invite our Presiding Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry … the first black Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church … to join us as well. Our plans are to have a glorious worship service in this building followed by a big party under a tent on the Commons.

I mention this in the context of this sermon because it is sign of the “joy” and the “delight” that we … the people of this congregation … have in our life as a community of faith. You are the ones who give of yourselves in many ways to make this church what it is. And in spite of what the world deals us, that same faith will lead us in the days ahead.

Now back to the details of our Stewardship Campaign. This week we will mail to you Pledge Forms along with a letter from me and our Senior Warden and Pledge Campaign Chair, Joe Finnegan. We ask that you prayerfully consider your pledge to St. Cyprian’s for the coming year. If you have not made a financial pledge to St. Cyprian’s before, we ask that you prayerfully consider doing so now.

All the pledges of financial support are deeply appreciated. They allow for the Mission Board to be faithful stewards of the resources entrusted to its care, and the total number of pledges is a tangible indicator of the growth of this congregation. However, I believe it is important to acknowledge the fact that number of you were significantly impacted by Hurricane Matthew and finances are stretched thin. I understand that some of you will have to make hard choices, and our pledge total may actually be lower than anticipated because of that. The Mission Board and I are committed to being faithful stewards of what is given to us … whatever the amount … and we will rejoice in ever gift, no matter how small.

In closing I return to our readings from Luke and Isaiah. The picture Jesus paints in Luke is not all that pretty, yet he proclaims that it is cause for us to testify to our faith. The raw fact is that the just ten years ago this week this church was torn apart by schism which means that our recent history is not all that pretty either. Yet through the faithful commitment of its people this congregation has, indeed, testified to its faith as a Resurrection people … we are a Resurrection people regardless of what the world throws at us. There is nothing ordinary about that!

The words of Isaiah to those returning from exile are as true in this community of St. Cyprian’s in 2016 as they were 2,500 years ago.

*for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.*

In these days following the election of a new president … in these days living in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew … we must remember that we are that Jerusalem in this corner of God’s vineyard … and it is a “joy.” And we are the blessed children of God … God’s people of “delight.” There is nothing ordinary about that.

On this Sunday following the election, and remembering that Veterans Day was Friday, I will end with two prayers:

For our Country:

Almighty God, who has given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech you that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of you favor and glad to do your will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought to our shores from many races and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to your law, we may show forth your praise among the nations of the earth. In times of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of troubles, encourage our trust in You. All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amen.

For those in our Armed Forces:

Almighty God, we commend to your gracious care and keeping all the men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.