

**9 Pentecost
August 11, 2019**

**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.**

You have often heard me quote from the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer: "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." This sermon is about the "thoughts and prayers" that have gone up for the victims of mass shootings ... last week, last month, last year ... this last decade. Those "thoughts and prayers" in all their many forms ... not just hollow words. The prayers of anguish where no words are uttered ... just screams and sobs. The prayers of the feet of protesters marching and waving signs. Prayers of the blood-stained garments lying on the floor of the ER. And, the empty prayers of the of those who recite words but take no responsible action to deter the carnage ... all for self-serving reasons.

This sermon is also about hope. The hope that Abraham experienced when he looked to the starlit sky. The hope that is equated with faith in the Letter to the Hebrews. The hope that the disciples of Jesus knew when they heard the words in today's Gospel reading from Luke, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And the hope that I have ... and I trust that all of you have ... a hope in our faith that wants the world to be a better place tomorrow than it is today. A hope for justice for all of God's children regardless of the color of their skin, or their religion, or their nationality, or the ability or disability with which they were born, their political power, or how much money they have in the bank.

Prayer is an essential element of the response of all people of faith, Christians and non-Christians alike. It links us intimately both to those for whom we pray, and to the one to whom we are praying, thus to the divine intention of wellbeing and care for all of God's beloved. This is equally true of our prayer for those with people we love and with whom we are friends ... and also for those with whom we are at odds and disagree, with our "enemies," as Jesus called them. They, too, are the ones he told us to love and pray for, in spite of how they treat us or treat others ... in spite of how much we may be threatened by or loathe them. Perhaps especially in a politically polarized context like our own, where civil discourse is increasingly replaced by adversarial accusation, prayer is fundamental to combatting the increasing demonization of those who differ from us politically, culturally, ethnically, economically, and in any other way. We must pray for the other, no matter who the other is, if we are going to create an environment where God's love can triumph ... where hope can flourish.

Today's series of readings begins with the story of Abraham being promised descendants as numerous as there are stars in the sky. This promise comes while Sarah ... Abraham's wife of many years ... has been unable to bear a child. It is a promise of hope in the midst of what

appears to be an impossible situation ... a promise from a God only recently revealed to Abraham.

The way many people read the Bible, Abraham was humanity's last chance to establish a relationship with God. The Book of Genesis begins with the Creation narrative, and in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve set in motion a pattern of disobedience to God's commandments. For generations that disobedience continued ... repeatedly in the Book of Genesis, we hear these stories. The Great Flood ... in which only Noah and all those animals were saved ... allow creation to start anew and perhaps follow God's lead. Yet, humans once again came dangerously close to separating themselves from their creator God. Humans built the tower of Babel ... a tower that would break through to the heavens ... yet God again intervened and scattered the people across the earth to speak different languages. God was offering a way to live in harmony God's creation, yet humankind was not yet ready to accept the gift. Then we hear the story of Abraham.

Many scholars believe these stories in our Bible were written to explain to people why the world is like it is, and why humans are the way they are. These stories address questions of life and death, rather than being simply explanations about how the world was created. In the story of Abraham we are provided with a new hope through which God will try to create a people to live by a certain set of values. In the story of Abraham we are told there is only one God, not many. And, just as importantly in this story of Abraham, there is a Covenant relationship between God and Abraham ... it is a two-way relationship: God doing something for Abraham, and Abraham doing something for God. The blessings of God are passed on from one generation to another.

I don't think it is a surprise to too many people that my concept of God is NOT one of a supreme being in the image of a human ... in spite of Michelangelo's picture of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. For me, the God that was alive in Jesus is alive in each one of us as well. And, not only is God alive in us ... we are alive in God. That means that our actions make God what God is. Every cell of our bodies is a part of God. What I believe is that God wants this entire universe to be a better place each moment than it was just the moment before.

So, did God come to Abraham and speak in an audible voice to Abraham in some ancient dialect? Personally, I don't think so. Jewish *midrash* tells us that Abraham ... then known as Abram ... worked in his father's idol-making shop. Basically, Abraham made amulets and charms and talismans and idols of the many gods that the people around him wanted to use to order their lives. I believe that as Abram carved these images out of wood he realized the futility ... all these idols were just hunks of wood ... that's all ... just hunks of wood. So, Abram's heart and soul were disturbed ... but he also had hope. If this wasn't the answer, then what was?

If these idols were really nothing but hunks of wood, Abraham mused, was there any god at all? Looking to the sky, he could not imagine that there wasn't a Creator of it all ... just look at all those stars. And he also knew ... deep in his bones ... that there had to be a better way, yet to

find that better way he would have to start over. So, he took his family and left his home country ... a refugee of sorts ... in search of how to live a life in community, and in relationship to whatever that divine power was that awakened his heart and soul. He lived in a hope that the one God of all Creation would lead him to establish a people where values would hold the community together, and serve all of the people, not just some of them.

The story of Abraham is about obedience to the will of God ... not blind obedience, because the Bible stories tell us that Abraham frequently challenged God and asked questions. But, in the end, Abraham trusted this God who had made such extraordinary promises, and in so doing Abraham formed a very special and personal relationship with God.

Other religions have other stories written to explain to their people ... in their culture and their environment ... why the world is like it is, and why humans are like they are. But, these stories all have one thing in common ... knowing that the community functions best when everyone is respected, appreciated, treasured and cherished. Every major world religion has ... at its core ... the concept of treating others the same way you would want to be treated ... what we Christians call the Golden Rule. This is the basis of justice for our world.

Granted, the people of the world ... and all the major religions of the world ... have not always lived up to this standard. For one, it challenges some basic instincts of survival. If there is only so much food to go around, then rather than share what little we have maybe we should fight to make sure our family ... our tribe ... our nation ... gets all of it. I mean ... WE are more important than THEY are, aren't WE? Food, gold, power ... you name it ... the more WE have than the other tribe has, then the better off WE are ... isn't that the real rule of life? Abraham said "No," that is not the rule that will sustain our community. Moses said, "No," that is not the rule that will work for us ... but, here are ten rules that I think might work. Jesus said, "No," ... emphatically "NO!" Give everything away for the sake of the other ... that is what will sustain our community ... our global community. Jesus said, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So what does all this have to do with prayer ... and with hope? We pray for others ... whether friends or foes ... in our hopes that they might find comfort and healing ... or that they might see the light ... or that they have a change of heart ... or perhaps that they will behave differently. However, we must be clear ... the efficacy of our prayer is measured not by how much that person changes, but by how we change. Our prayers for the victims and perpetrators of mass shootings, for our fellow citizens and our elected officials, must open our eyes to our own values and priorities. They must open our hearts to what we will do, what actions we will take, how we will adjust our own expectations and entitlements, and what we are willing to give up in order to make this world safe for and respectful of everyone.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle ... the tireless exertions and passionate concerns of dedicated individuals."

In our prayer we are always and inevitably called to conversion, to living differently and in ways that break down barriers between us ... in ways that allow us to hold one another accountable because first we hold ourselves accountable. We must understand that our prayer for others is equally prayer for ourselves. Our prayer assumes and requires a willingness to hear how we can change, how our own, dug-in heels might be released, and how our helplessness might be replaced with the hope and courage to action that finds its source in taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. And ... remember ... prayer is about our “deeds” as well as our “thoughts.” Prayer is “with AND without words.” Prayer is our hearts and souls being moved by the divine presence of God wherever... and whenever ... we encounter that presence.

I have hope. I have a hope like Abraham’s hope. I have a hope that sounds a lot like the hope Jesus spoke about. I have a hope that our world will, indeed, be a better place tomorrow than it is today ... even if I have to give up something precious in the process. I have a hope that our prayers will be expressed in deeds that lead to justice. I have a hope that there will be a time when each of see the “OTHER” ... however you may define the “OTHER” ... as a fellow child of God deserving of our love and respect in spite of the difference that lie between us.

Some people would rather debate theology, or Biblical interpretation, or doctrine, or beliefs, or tradition, than to actually take seriously what Jesus took seriously. Folks, this is not rocket science. Prayer is responding to God ... however that encounter with God may happen ... responding to God, by thought AND by deed, with AND without words. It is not rocket science. All we have to do is get on with it. Practice loving a difficult person. Or, give away something valuable to you ... be it a material object or an attitude or a habit. Go bless someone you dislike ... bless them by being open and loving in the face of their animosity toward you. Go encourage a friend ... not by giving them advice, but by listening to their pain. Feed a hungry person ... not just their physical hunger, but their spiritual hunger for human contact as well. Say I’m sorry ... and really mean it. This is not rocket science ... just get on with it. It is not like we don’t know what to do. With a hope for a world that will be better tomorrow than it is today, just get over that fear that holds you back, and get on with it.

Amen.