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| Fourth Sunday in Lent |
| Year B RCL |

March 11, 2018

Trinity Church, Hartford

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

The Rev. Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

I am particularly struck in this morning’s scripture lessons at how they depict the utterly human actions of people even when they have been the recipients of God’s saving acts. Their response to God’s work on their behalf often seems incredibly picky and even resentful that God’s action was not up to their standards or expectations. After having been rescued from slavery in Egypt and led safely by God toward the holy land, the people spoke against God and against Moses, complaining “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food you’ve chosen to provide us with.” Wow! How picky can you get? It’s not enough, they seem to be saying to God, to save us from the brutality of slavery, guide us across treacherous waters and deserts, and to feed us along the way, but, really, you ought to feed us with haute cuisine as well, satisfactory to our refined palates. This insistence on only the best cuisine apparently continues among the people who have by God’s grace eventually been settled in the Promised Land for, as the psalmist says, “Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; \*  
they were afflicted because of their sins. They abhorred all manner of food \* and drew near to death's door.” Apparently they would rather die than eat unpalatable food. The people apparently had never heard of the old adage, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. But such persnickety mouth looking seems endemic to many of us who have been called by God to a new life. Responding to that call does not necessarily eliminate our inclination to gripe about the things God has given us along the way. Receiving God’s grace does not automatically turn us into saints pure of heart and mind. Paul reminds us that “All of us once lived among the spirits of this world in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” It seems that even among the faithful those corrupt desires have not been entirely eradicated.

There are times when I think it would have been a lot neater if God had simply cleared the board of all who were sinners and replaced them with all who had been purified, who were no longer following the desires of the flesh. It would have been nice if some had been made perfect saints in one divine fell-swoop and everyone else had been left corrupt through and through. God might have divided all humanity into the pure and the evil, into either the children of light or the children of darkness, with no confusion or overlap between them. If God had done that we wouldn’t have to live in the rather murky world in which we are both saved and sinner at the same time, in which we eagerly accept the banquet feast God spreads before us and then criticize the menu options and the presentation. This confused mixture of good and evil, however, is the world God has left for us to live in: it is a world which even in its messiness God chose to send his son to die for. Jesus did not come into a perfect and holy world in order to die for the righteous and the pure. Jesus came, instead, to die for the sinful, the picky, the ungrateful, those lost in darkness but hoping for light. And he came not to extinguish the darkness all at once and once and for all but instead to bring light into the darkness. The light will not extinguish the darkness completely but by shining into the darkness it will expose the evil that the darkness tries to hide. And that darkness remains even in those of us who have been saved. We remain both saint and sinner at the same time. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, but whose good works from time to time go awry and corrupt even our best intentions. Sometimes, without meaning to, we parade ourselves before others as the truly virtuous and blessed whose lives have received divine approval in every respect because we’ve accepted God in faith. And in the process we create pockets of resentment by our displays of self-righteousness because we appear to have forgotten that while living by faith we still live imperfect and less than holy lives.

Nevertheless, we have come to this place this morning because we have been attracted in some way, unique to each of us, to the light of the truth we hear in the words of scripture, or feel in the emotions of the liturgy, or in our prayers and meditations. Our glimpse of the truth of the Gospel will not eliminate our tendency to still complain from time to time and with varying degrees of intensity about something we find amiss or not to our taste in the rituals of our worship services, or prayer practices, or church actions or inactions, or our fellow parishioners, or the clergy, or any number of things that make our religious practices less then fully pure and true. We may not be as picky as the people in the wilderness who wanted more refined food, but we are not, even as children of God who believe we have been graced by God’s saving power, above finding fault with the world in which we still live as witnesses to the truth of God’s love. But it’s important to discern what ought to be critiqued prophetically and what is so trivial that we can live with it even if it doesn’t suit our refined tastes and sensibilities.

The world has been redeemed but this does not mean that it cannot be repaired and rebuilt in various ways until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. The trick is to focus on what is truly in need of repair and what is inconsequential and superficial.

It should be clear that one thing we are commanded by God to do is to help shine the light of truth into the caverns and recesses in which the darkness still hides, to challenge a world not yet exemplifying full justice for all. Chief among these challenges, perhaps, are identifying those places of darkness which hate and resist the light of truth. There are forces of evil still at work in the world, forces which fear the truth because it will expose their insidious and destructive power. They will call that truth fake news and will try to deflect attention from the evil that is hidden by lies and deceptions and demagogic appeals to our basest and most primitive fears. There are forces of evil, for example, that do not want their advocacy of the unchecked proliferation of guns to expose the basic truth that idolizing the right to bear arms can only come at the price of the deaths of children. The forces of evil do not want the truth of the consequences of possessing and threatening the use of nuclear weapons to reveal the hollowness of a foreign policy built on the willingness to use weapons of mass destruction rather than on the peaceful persuasions of diplomacy.

Living without reliance upon the gun, or practicing diplomacy rather than threatening others with mutually assured destruction, of course, are never without risk. We live in a redeemed but a not yet morally perfect world. We live in a world we are both children of light and children of darkness all at the same time, and this means that we don’t live in a world without risk. This means that we have to be sure what we are risking when we speak the truth and whether we believe that risk is worth the cost. Is it better to risk a world in which we acknowledge and accept the possession of nuclear weapons by our enemies or to risk a world-wide conflagration by insisting that only our nation should own and use such weapons? Is it better to risk the death of children by allowing virtually everyone to own a gun of whatever kind, or to risk the loss of some of our second-amendment freedoms by placing some restrictions on gun ownership and even on some guns themselves? Is it better to risk the loss of social safety nets by reducing taxes on the wealthy rather than risk restricting their wealth and their virtually unlimited freedom to do whatever their wealth allows them do? Is it better to risk the appearance of self-righteousness by bringing our moral values to bear against unjust institutions, policies, laws, and personal behavior rather than keep our values hidden in the darkness? Is it better to risk the purity of our personal lives rather than enter into the messy, picky complexities, and even compromises, of the social world in which we already have great power?

The good news is that we can face the risks of working fearlessly for God’s purposes in our confused and murky world because, as Paul reminds us, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—[by grace you have been saved--] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Standing firmly on that ground we have nothing to fear and nothing to complain about as we set out to bring the light of God into a world still marked with pockets of darkness.