

Sermon: C Proper 28 2022  
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods  
13 November 2022  
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Isaiah 65:17-25  
Luke 21:5-19  
Psalm 98  
Thessalonians 3:6-13

“By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Well, if there is an endurance meter somewhere most of us would have gained a good bit of soul during these past days!

Thankfully we are gathered together again in light and heat, if a bit weary.

Jesus says those words giving a pep talk to the folks in Jerusalem, predicting the utter destruction of their beautiful and precious temple to be followed by betrayals, arrests and persecutions of those who follow him. Never mind all that, Jesus assures them. He will provide all they need—words of defensive wisdom and the promise that they will not perish, but, in fact be strengthened by the entire experience. Whew!

I don't usually look at my old sermons, but I did this time. In 2010 on this same day in the liturgical calendar year C, with these same readings, one of the oldest and most lovely Episcopal churches in the Diocese of Louisiana had burned to the ground just days before, an inferno so hot that all the old barge board walls collapsed and the beautiful stained glass melted into blobs still warm when I toured the wreckage a few days later. There was nothing left—not a prayer book, not a pew, not the old, hand-hewn altar.

A tearful parishioner moaned “there is nothing left of St. Matthew's,” but, of course, there was something left—the church, the entire congregation; no one perished in the fire.

The wedding scheduled for the Saturday night following the fire happened at the nearby Presbyterian Church; the Lutherans invited the Episcopalians to worship in their space on Sundays, and, in time with insurance, and a lot of fundraising and good planning, a new St. Matthew's was constructed on the same site and is a lovely place of worship. They had endured and their faith seemed intact when I did a funeral in the new church, remarking to someone that it was actually a better worship space than before. “Don't tell that to one of the old guard!” I was warned. They wanted a replica, not a new place, a temptation, especially among us Episcopalians who value tradition so highly.

Here at St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods a new day is about to dawn with the calling of a new rector. You will see her virtually later this morning and she will be here among you on the first Sunday in Advent—the start of the new liturgical year.

In honor of that promising newness, the prophet Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom, lions and lambs together, has long offered a source of hope for God's people, as promising today as it was in the difficult times of ancient Israel. Isaiah knew what they needed to hear, what we still need to hear—that this is what the world will be in God's reign—creating anew dwelling places of equity, fairness, and fulfillment, where children grow up knowing the promises of God and realizing the possibilities of good, peaceful living—a hoped-for reality God's blessing confers even now if we are aware enough to read the signs of it and to commit ourselves to working for it.

Isaiah's vision informs everything about the ministry of Jesus. The necessity of the reign of God underlay every word Jesus spoke and every healing act he offered—all of it. The community Jesus' followers strove to create after Pentecost was intended to reflect that vision, a community we now call the church.

That is what this congregation is—a small outpost of the Kingdom of God here to offer care and hope in the name of Jesus and to safeguard and pass on that vision with the help of the Holy Spirit.

St. Augustine's is a healthy parish; your new rector is lucky about that and so are you.

Joan did a masterful job helping to restore confidence and a sense of joy here. New people came and were welcomed; there is pleasant refreshment in worship and challenging opportunities to hear holy scripture and to learn from it.

But Joan didn't do it all—you did it together. A rector and congregation are in a partnership that depends on trust and a lot of careful communication by both.

You have had years of good, caring communication and trust. Keep it up.

Give even more attention to tending to the flock as you do to keeping the buildings standing and see to it that you take good care of your new rector too.

Take at least a year to get to know each other; tell her your stories, share your hopes and your fears. If the church is not a place where we can be honest, then it isn't a church at all, but some sort of social club on Honeymoon Bay Road.

Don't be afraid of what feels new and different; wishing for a replica of what used to be denies the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire new ideas, new ways, new hopes.

Above all, remember that St. Augustine's is an outpost of the Peaceable Kingdom—all you beloved lions and lambs—strive to be a sign of the reign of God to the rest of South Whidbey and to the world. God bless you in this new day.