

Proper 28C
Isaiah 65.17-25
Collect re: Holy Scripture
St. Augustine's, Freeland
November 17 2013

Blessed be the Name of God

I entered seminary in the fall of 1964. For the next three years, I took various New Testament courses from Professor Oscar Seitz, a meticulous and thoughtful teacher, very like our own Tom Johnson. Dr. Seitz supervised my senior thesis and, increasingly, we spent time together in class and out. I mention him to you this morning because in every class that Dr. Seitz taught, he began class time by praying the collect we have prayed this morning. “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ...” This is what you and I have prayed this morning, and so my classmates and I prayed in countless class meetings, many years ago. It is also true that generations of Anglicans have prayed this prayer, too. It was written for the first Book of Common Prayer, 1549.

In praying this prayer so often and so regularly, my classmates and I learned the collect by heart, of course, and we also learned and adopted an attitude toward Holy Scripture. The process is clearly

described in the collect, hear, then read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. Much as we were devoted to Dr. Seitz and wanted to be formed by the prayer, most of us found the directives in the collect doable until we got to the last one, the one about inwardly digesting. We could hear the Scriptures, presumably read aloud; read them for ourselves; mark them in the sense of paying attention, like “mark my words;” learn them as they informed our lives and our faith. We could do all of that. It was the digesting part that proved complicated.

The more we studied the Scriptures, the more it happened that from time to time, we would come across something in Scripture that was simply indigestible. For my part, I am mindful of the way women are often described and treated in Scripture. I am mindful of the Scriptures’ tolerance of slavery. I am mindful of the admonitions in Leviticus about not wearing clothing of mixed fibers and not eating shellfish. I am mindful of Jesus’ counsel that we not invite our friends in for supper, because they could return the favor. I am mindful of the directive in Ephesians that wives are to be subject to their husbands. These, and frankly lots of others, I find quite indigestible!

Happily, however, for us this morning, we are given this marvelous reading from the prophet Isaiah. With this inspiring text, we can do all that the collect demands, and altogether happily. Hear, then read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

In order to give the prophet a proper hearing, we need to understand something; we need to be altogether clear eyed. What the prophet declares is a promise of God. Hear this: What the prophet declares is a promise of God. It is not a vision; not a vain hope; not some pious drivel aimed at placating the hearers. Nor is it about some other realm of existence, not about some imaginary sphere. It is about this world, this life, this earth. It is about the world where children die of malnutrition. About the world where horrible typhoons decimate a population. A world where people are unemployed. Where sorrow and hunger are all too vividly known. It is a world with a tear stained face; a world that knows weeping very well.

It is into this world that the voice of Isaiah speaks the word, the promise of God. Isaiah speaks a word, a promise made by the One who keeps promises. Yes, it is a time yet to come, but it is a promised time to come. And it will come; it will come; it will come even to our island.

“...I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” It could be dreadful news, you know, something new, a past that cannot be remembered. But not so here. God speaks of the refreshment of all creation, its revitalization, a new breath to enliven every fiber. Using the metaphor of Jerusalem, God will “create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”

To a world where infants die early and no one grows old, comes this word: "...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard...or the cry of distress. No more shall there be...an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime..."

To a people who have known exile and felt what they took to be abandonment, to a people who have hungered and known no satisfaction, to them comes this word: "[You] shall build houses and inhabit them; [you] shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit..."

Even the menace of nature is to be made gentle, "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw with the ox..." Only the serpent will go hungry, a reminder of the consequences of Eden.

Yet, the remembrance of Eden leads to the place where things will resolve themselves, on the Holy Mountain of God. "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD." As the Prophet says elsewhere, on the holy mountain there will be that Banquet to which all the tribes will be invited, that is, all the tribes. And we will enjoy a feast, "a feast of fat things" [Isa 25.6], the prophet tells us. No more cholesterol! Now there's a promise!

We are the inheritors of this marvelous promise. Through Jesus, our Lord, the Risen One, we are joined to the promises that Isaiah reports, dependable, durable, luminous, trustworthy promises, promises of God.

It was early last week that I reached this point in writing this sermon. In the midst of this thinking and writing, in the midst of rejoicing in the vision of Isaiah, I received word from a friend in Canada of the death of someone whose life and work I admired very much, a person very well acquainted with God's promise as given to us by Isaiah.

Robert Farrar Capon died in early September, in his late 80's. He was an Episcopal priest, a writer of many books and most of all, a cook, a buoyant, extravagant cook and a writer of equally extravagant cookbooks. *Food for Thought, Party Spirit*, both books full of their own flavors and fine recipes. One of his books was called *Light Theology and Heavy Cream*. The one that has served me well and one I have given away more than once is *The Supper of the Lamb*. If you were to read virtually anything I ever published, you'd find Robert Capon hidden in their somewhere.

Fr. Capon, as he was universally called, knew well the promise Isaiah reports, the promise of new heavens and a new earth, the promise of the feast on the mountain of the LORD. That endless *convivium* he called it. [171] "...an incautious and extravagant hope," he called it. [190] And he knew that what we receive here at this modest table is a reliable appetizer, a foretaste of that final Supper. One cannot read Robert Capon's celebration of food and conviviality and remain untouched; one cannot avoid viewing feasting and fasting in brand new ways, as something holy even if the food be simple and spare. [His recipe

for Pickled Mussels is a natural for us here near Penn Cove and what he offers by way of Fish House Punch would unsteady of boatload of hearty sailors.]

What remains in one's memory after reading Fr. Capon's *The Supper of the Lamb* is the conviction that God's extravagance must serve as the pattern for our own. That the generosity of God, the grace-filled self-offering of God, the willingness of God to attend to us, to receive us, to invite us forward and sustain us, this must be the template for our future and our calling in the world. God's generosity!

Now let me tell you what all this means for St. Augustine's Church. It means we have no choice but to be hopeful, each of us, all of us, no matter what. The promise of God invites, indeed, requires us to be hopeful. Hopeful for the present and hopeful for the future.

Yes, hopeful people, and people whose hopefulness is expressed in what we choose to do as a parish.

As a parish, we are now in the stewardship season, the time when we become particularly mindful of the resources we need to gather and the resources we are called to disburse, to give away, to share. The rector and vestry will determine where our resources go and how our priorities are expressed and satisfied by those disbursements. In that light, I have a word of counsel for our decision makers.

As we set about identifying our hopes and intentions for the next period of time, say the next five years, and confident in the hope given to us by our extravagant God, I would urge the following:

That we, as a parish, seek advice from the young people in Journey to Adulthood, the Greening Committee, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and Integrity. Listen to these folks to learn from them what matters most. And having heard them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest what they have to tell us, these primary concerns leading us toward long term goals. Journey to Adulthood, Greening, Peace Fellowship and Integrity. I'm suggesting that we take our goals from what these folks tell us.

Then, once these priorities are identified and named, that we do our very best to accomplish these goals with the energy and purposeful drive that the Episcopal Church Women mobilize at Market time. There is no group in our parish that musters more vitality, creativity, imagination, enthusiasm and strength than these 'marketeers,' absolutely no one!

Imagine then priorities raised up and focused by our youth, by our concern for creation, by our eagerness to make peace and our yearning for inclusion, these animated by the amazing sense of purpose and its energy made visible at Market time. Imagine! We would surely set the world spinning, and, more importantly, doubtless please God.

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