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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 26, 2022

Proper 8, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary Track 2

[1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21](#)

[Psalm 16](#)

[Galatians 5:1,13-25](#)

[Luke 9:51-62](#)

In the name of Jesus Christ, who sets us free for freedom: Amen.

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What is freedom, exactly?

Such a powerful word with so many meanings. Let freedom ring, we sing. This country has always aspired to be a land of freedom. But freedom can get complicated in practice. They say my freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins, and in reality different freedoms are often in conflict with one another. We might agree on some basic principles like freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble. But even those freedoms aren't absolute: what happens when a religion endorses bigotry or hatred? When does speech become harassment, or an assembly become a riot? What freedoms take precedence over which others? Freedom to carry weapons? Freedom from taxes? Freedom to send your children to school where you choose, or not to? Freedom to marry the person you choose? Freedom from hunger or poverty?

Sometimes our freedoms change. One week ago the settled law of this country held that states had the authority to regulate a citizen's freedom to carry a concealed weapon but not a citizen's right to make her own decision about whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. But in the last four days the United States Supreme Court has reversed both of those, so that today suddenly the law of this land is that the freedom to carry a gun is so essential that a state can hardly regulate it, while the freedom to make an individual choice about abortion can be given or taken away by a state legislature.

Personally I'm grieving and angry about both those decisions and especially the second one. Probably some of you here this morning are too. Others may be pleased about one or the other. If you're someone who in your own conscience believes that the life of a fetus is truly equivalent to the life of a born human being and that there are truly no circumstances under which an abortion is merited, then I think your call today is to be compassionate and magnanimous in the moment of victory, and then to get to work to help protect actual children, to fight child poverty and get parents the societal support they need so that the massive movement you have built can proceed to building a true culture of life. On the other hand if you're someone who believes like me, and like the majority of the Episcopal Church which has been on record for decades that abortion needs to be legal, that a fetus is a potential human life rather than an existing one, that there are times when abortions are justifiable and even necessary, and that whatever each of us may think, the person best positioned to make those tender and profound decisions is the one who is carrying that potential life in her own body rather than the government, then I think our call today is to be angry and lament, and then to get to work, smart and strategic and for the long term, and to hang onto hope in the midst of a very bleak hour.

The letter to the Galatians is the angriest letter in the entire Bible. Paul writes it hot. “You stupid Galatians, who has duped you?” he writes. These Galatians he’s writing to are Gentiles, members of a church he planted as a traveling missionary. But since he’s been away, other Christian teachers have come to visit and have been telling the Galatians the faith Paul taught them isn’t enough. In order to be saved, they have to become Jewish first, to undergo circumcision and begin keeping the commandments of the Jewish Law like eating kosher food and keeping the sabbath. And Paul is livid. At one point he writes that he wishes these teachers who are so excited about getting the Galatians circumcised would just castrate themselves. For Paul this is a matter of principle. It’s not that he thinks circumcision is bad or the Law is bad. Far from it. He is Jewish and circumcised. And as far as we know he himself continued to follow the Law for his whole life. But Paul doesn’t believe what applies to him as a Jew has to apply to the Galatians as Gentiles, because he’s come to believe that they as Gentiles are fully saved simply by coming to faith and baptism in Jesus.

We heard today also from Luke’s gospel about Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem, the destination where he’ll face the cross. And to get there the most direct route is through Samaria, a land Jewish people often took the long way around. Jews and Samaritans were sibling peoples, both tracing their ancestry to Moses and the early Israelites, both reading the Torah as scripture, but with different traditions, and different competing Temples, and a deep mistrust and resentment towards each other in the way two groups of people with a shared history, profound commonalities, and some clear differences so often do. So predictably in one village Jesus and his disciples don’t get a warm welcome. But when James and John ask Jesus for permission to call down holy fire from heaven to destroy them, Jesus rebukes them, and they go on to the next village.

I don't think we can draw direct conclusions from our scripture readings today that will settle exactly how Christians are supposed to think about abortion. Scripture doesn't work that way. It's the story of salvation, not a handbook for every single issue and situation we face in our own place and time. So all I can do today is look at these readings today and pull out a few things that might be helpful for us. One is that sometimes it's OK to be angry and fight with all the passion you've got for a cause. Some of the people Paul was angry at and on the other side of major issues from were people like Peter and James who also ended up with books in their own names in scripture. So I take from that that God doesn't expect us to necessarily be perfectly correct so much as to fight with what we've got for the truth as God gives us to see it.

I see Paul fighting for the Galatians' freedom, which is a freedom not to act the way his way of life calls for, but a freedom to act the way that is appropriate for them in theirs.

I see a land of Jews and Samaritans, two peoples joined by a common heritage and common traditions and common worldviews and several very serious differences, and those differences being where the resentment comes from, and it's hard not to think about a country that feels increasingly divided between two blocs joined by heritage and tradition and worldview and several very serious differences. And I look at James and John and their readiness to rid the world of their opponents through holy, God-sanctioned violence, and at Jesus who rebukes them and calls them to repentance, to a different way.

Pray for this country. Pray for everyone who is reeling, who is hurting, who is grieving, who is afraid. Pray for our leaders. Pray that we will live by the Spirit and be guided by the Spirit and find our way into the true freedom of the children of God.