

Sermon 6-14

Scriptures: Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:23

Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa

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This winter I tutored our 9-year old grandson in a ZOOM math class; actually it's more accurate to say he tutored me. One of the topics was "sequences," strings of numbers where he had to figure out a rule generating the sequence. When we came upon the sequence of 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, I was stumped, but he looked at it and said, "that's the Fibonacci sequence! You build it by adding up the previous two numbers." I never studied that! Wanting to learn more, I borrowed a children's picture book from the library called The Fibonacci sequence in Nature (yes, there actually is one!). The sequence can be found in a nautilus shell, the spirals of sunflowers and galaxies and numbers of flower petals. I went into the garden and counted. Sure enough, lavender, violas, cyclamen, and verbenas: all have five!

We have so many reasons to praise God in creation—spring flowers, rivers and oceans, redwood forests, fertile soils and summer fruits. God makes things new in our lives—healing of broken bodies and souls, flourishing after loss, babies, new work, graduations, communities of love like this church. Exodus reminds us of God's grace. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." In Christ, God's saving grace expands to all peoples, all nations, grace as in his announcement leaving the wilderness:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

I imagine you and I have known times when God as if on eagles' wings saved us from captivity to loss, guilt or shame, illness or injustice. Before we moved to California, I experienced a trauma that led me into depression. I was encircled by family, friends and church and in recovery when we moved to California in 2000. As I hiked that first winter in a forested canyon of Annapolis State Park, I suddenly looked up in surprise. Water streamed out of the stony, fern-covered hillside onto the trail beside me. I stopped. The noisy, bubbling, dancing water sang a song of

consolation, peace and joy. Suffering broke open my heart to awe and wonder at God's everlasting love. Paul tells the Christian church persecuted by Rome and threatened with death, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace that passes all understanding.

By grace, God invites us, sinners though we are, into Covenant, a binding, sacred agreement that establishes a lifelong, unbreakable relationship between God and God's people, a covenant where each side promises to uphold their responsibilities. As they arrive at Mt. Sinai, God invites Israel to live by God's words alone, so they may become a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. In thanksgiving, the people of Israel promise to do "everything that the Lord has spoken." They trust God so much they promise obedience even before hearing the 10 Commandments, their covenant responsibilities! We also know how hard it was for them to obey, as it still is for us.

Covenants are fragile. We are all sinners who can see our Covenant promise to "love our neighbors as ourselves" lie shattered before people living without food, shelter or health care, the cruelty of immigrants unlawfully detained and denied legal representation, a crumbling health care system, and women and LGBTQ+ minorities denied rights over their own bodies. Our covenant is broken in the suppression of historical truths and of 1st Amendment and other Constitutional rights. Our covenant is betrayed by the political censorship of American history, science and medicine, broadcast news and the arts, or the dissolution of federal marine and wildlife sanctuaries. God's justice and peace is shattered by public corruption and the glorification of violence. God's circle of love is broken by "things done and left undone," and it affects everyone, for as St. Paul says of the body of humanity, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it."

In Jesus Christ, God renews God's Covenant with humanity, raising us up with truth, healing love and forgiveness. The words of the Eucharist remind us of God's grace. "Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to waken strength and courage in our hearts and promises "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." In turn, our covenant responsibilities are to obey the 10 Commandments and others like these:

- "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, for they cannot repay you."
- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

- “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.”
- Or today, “Go...proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”

My brothers and sisters, Jesus makes it simple, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, and the second is like it. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22:40)

As Baptized people we promise to restore the broken body of our nation, our world “for righteousness’ sake.” “Thoughts and prayers” alone are powerless without our obedience to God’s command to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” and “to proclaim...the Kingdom of heaven has come near” in word and deed. In the words of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or servant of the state, but rather than conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, never its tool...If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club with no moral or spiritual authority.”

As we work, Jesus calls us to live humbly, completely reliant on God’s grace and mercy (no gold or silver or copper!). Jesus calls us to be peaceable, shaking the dust off our feet when we’re reviled. “See, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Dire consequences face us, yet that is our calling. No wonder St. Paul writes about suffering to persecuted Romans: “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

Suffering is never an end in itself, but it is as much a part of the Christian spiritual journey as awe and wonder. Suffering breaks open our hearts with pain, confusion, anger and powerlessness to receive God’s love like arid gardens absorb rain or a spring flower opens to a pollinating bee. **Just as Jesus suffered in the wilderness, suffering leads us to turn to God in prayer, to be healed and strengthened by our scars, and then to build, as he did, a community of love centered in a God of compassion for all who are harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd. Suffering strengthens and emboldens you and me to restore God’s circle of love, to bear justice and peace into people’s lives. In covenant with Christ, you become the answer to someone’s prayer.**

Pope Leo's addresses in Spain this week remind us "We cannot believe in Jesus and kill the innocent. We cannot believe in Jesus and abandon those who suffer, those who weep, those who flee from misery...every human being must be regarded as a subject of rights and duties....Dignity, justice, and the common good should be the measure of social relations, both at the national and international levels. ...Such dignity belongs to every human being by the very fact of their existence... [the motto of the European union, *In varietate concordia* reminds us,] unity does not standardize, but rather unites in diversity, making cultures, sensibilities and traditions an opportunity for mutual enrichment." An America like that, a world like that, is worth our striving, a kingdom deserving of awe and wonder.

When I was growing up, we had a small black and white TV. My earliest memory was watching Queen Elizabeth's Coronation at a time with its own challenges and suffering—the Korean War, the Cold War, and killing London smog. My English mother let me stay home from school to watch. The vast size of Westminster Abbey, the stately procession into the church, the placing of the heavy crown on the young queen—its majesty so moved me that I remember standing in awe and wonder. I was reminded this week that a hymn the Queen chose for the occasion was "All people who on earth do dwell" based on Psalm 100. "Know that the Lord is God indeed; without our aid he did us make: we are his folk, he doth us feed, and for his sheep he doth us take. / O enter then his courts with praise, approach with joy his courts unto; praise, laud and bless his Name always, for it is seemly so to do. / For why? the Lord our God is good, his mercy is forever sure; his truth at all times firmly stood, and shall from age to age endure."

