6 Pentecost C

Sermon

St Mark, Spokane

June 30, 2019

I want to say “thank you” to the Tuesday morning scripture and coffee group. We had a fine conversation last Tuesday and it was an excellent opportunity to listen for the questions presented in the texts and to help one another prepare for this preaching.

You’re all invited to this friendly time with the preacher, Tuesdays at 10:30, and for those of you who are working, parenting, or traveling, some of the same opportunity is available to you simply by reading, in advance, the 3 texts that will be read at the next Sunday worship.

I think I can guarantee you that if you do that simple thing, just read the texts for your daily devotions, you will hear a better sermon, not because the preacher’s words are more faithful or wise, but because your mind and heart will have been tilled and turned, now better soil for absorbing this Word.

We discovered several things about the texts last Tuesday.

 -- It helps to remember what you learned about Elijah and Elisha in confirmation class. The second part of the reading from 1 Kings 19 is a vivid description of the transfer of prophetic power from Elijah to Elisha, but the scene with the plow and cattle needs some unpacking.

Imagine 12 combines sweeping through a Palouse wheatfield, 12 in a slant line, each just off the shoulder of the other. That’s what’s happening here. The field is being worked only it is 12-pair of cattle cutting the soil with plows, Elisha in the final place. To have burned up his rigging, bridles, and plow, and then to have cut up and cooked the meat of his cattle was a sign of single-minded commitment to the new calling that had fallen on Elisha.

 --And what of this “mantle” that is thrown over Elisha’s shoulders?

This was a long, hairshirt, woven cloak, maybe with a hood. This was the symbol of the prophet and it was powerful. The mantle was powerful enough that when Elijah was it rolled up and slapped into the water of the Jordon River, it divided the water, allowing the prophets to cross on dry land. As if proof were needed that Elijah’s power had been given to Elisha, when Elisha exercises the cloak at the Jordan he is able to cross the water, again on dry land.

 --Finally, this text needs to be separated into two different scenes. The first lines of the reading refer to a transfer of power among the regional kings—as appointed by the prophet Elijah, his last works of power.

Such was the role of the prophet in the record of 1 and 2nd Kings. In this day, there was no separation of church and state! With all those foreign names it can be difficult to concentrate on the meaning of the text unless some time has been spent in advance. A good annotated bible, like the Lutheran Study bible, will give you notes to clarity such texts.

Now take a look, will you, at the Gospel text from Luke 9.

 --This too is a turning point in the lives of Jesus and the disciples and it comes powerfully in the words: “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

The rest of the text will solidify the resolve of Jesus behind these words. He is now completely focused and nothing, not inhospitable Samaritans, not half-hearted followers, not jumpy disciples, nothing is going to keep him from his appointed hour with the rulers in Jerusalem.

 --On Tuesday someone mentioned that they had always been disturbed by Jesus’ saying, “Let the dead bury their dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.”

It is a kind of disturbing image, isn’t it, especially for our children. But here again is Jesus’ single-minded focus. The only thing important is the Kimgdom of God that lies ahead, not the dead days behind us.

Without scaring our kids I think we can offer the intensity of Jesus as one who will not be knocked off track, and his steely-eyed focus will be LIFE for us!

The importance of the epistle text is present in the first line as well: From Galatians 5: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Maybe it’s time to make the point once again, that Christ’s freedom is the fundamental freedom that leads to life. We will celebrate 4th of July this week and focus again on freedom as Americans.

As you go about your celebrations, I hope you’ll keep your deepest Christ-won freedom in the treasure-chest of your heart.

The freedom from the law of requirements and “oughts” and “shoulds” that Jesus provides is the grounding source of every other freedom.

And Christ’s freedom is one that makes possible the commitments we make in life, not from compulsion but from freedom as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and as citizens of the United States.

Martin Luther said it most powerfully in his essay on Christian Liberty:

 “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Jesus is the deepest source of our freedom, and to follow him and share his focus on declaring this Kingdom of Freedom is to commit one’s life to a deep servanthood on behalf of all life, our enemies, the creation, every part of life that is shackled by sin.

Powerful images aren’t they?

They tell us much about the calling of God and our callings in the world.

We care about this at St Mark’s because we have set our faces to alter the ministry of this congregation by our callings. Pastor Dull, Jane Somers, and Tom Fallquist are just back from Collegeville, Minnesota where they have met with 13 other congregations from around the United States to compare plans for the year beginning this September. We have a carefully drawn up plan that will have been adjusted in conversation with leaders in Collegeville and these other congregations.

Through this work we will begin the patient process of working with each of you to identify and begin to practice the various callings given to each of you. I look forward to this work together and what we will learn from one another; I look forward to the way fresh leadership and deep joy arises in the congregation.

So, for instance, what mantle is draped over you? The Tuesday morning class imagined that the Word of God and the prophetic tradition might throw a mantle over our entire congregation, calling us in distinct ministry for the future. For individuals, such mantles might be in the form of a uniform, a nurse’s cap or pin; the white coat given to a new medical student, or the chasuable given the presiding pastor for use in worship.

The mantle of protection is in the form of a ballistic vest for police officers; it’s a special fabric that protects fire-fighters from the heat of flames, or a protective hood that shields the eyes of a welder. The mantle of parenthood, and grandparenthood, ranges from clothing stained by tears and spit-up, to the pride worn in suits and fancy dresses at a child’s graduation or wedding. What of those of you retired? There is a mantle to drape over you as well, perhaps the mantle of time, or the mantle of wisdom.

Whatever your calling, Jesus asks you to fulfill it out of fundamental respect for all life and under the power and promise that came to you in your baptism.

On that baptismal day, many of us were draped in heirloom gowns, our mantles that day, but woven into it was the mantle of Jesus enfolding us as promises were made. We will wear that Jesus-mantle at least one other day—it’s an older custom but one I wish we could see more often, that of the pure white funeral pall that is draped over a casket as we commend brothers and sisters to God’s final embrace.

That is the meaning of such a mantle: That when the God of justice for all looks at us God sees the mantle of forgiveness which is the robe of Christ Jesus. We are both free from every demand, and freed for service to the terrified world longing for such hope.

From the beginning of life to its close, Jesus has handed us the promise of Life-Everlasting, our complete protection and the raiment of our calling as “Little Christ’s” for one another and the world.

But it takes focus, the focus that drove Jesus to Jerusalem for the full expression of his calling by way of the cross.

Focus!

Think of Megan Rapinoe taking a corner kick on goal at the Women’s world cup of soccer!

As they’re saying at Hoopfest today, “Keep your eye on the ball!”

As you learned in driver-training, stay in your lane and don’t look at the traffic coming your way!

And put down your cell-phone for this ride with the very focused Jesus! Nothing less than the realm of God is at hand!

And where there is no focus, where you fail or find it impossible, remember Jesus who first set his face to Jerusalem, accomplishing everything needed for our salvation. After winning life and freedom back for us, he has turned his eyes to us, in compassion, and calls us again into this precious life!

This same Jesus provides for our inner nourishment as well as our external protection. In this we are both robed in Christ and filled by Christ as over the life-time of ingested bread and wine, we are filled with Jesus.

Come be filled again with the irrevocable promise and call of Jesus’ own flesh and blood.

It is “given for you” by the One who would not be deterred from the work of salvation, offered to all, in freedom and servanthood of life, our calling!

AMEN

*Sola Deo Gloria*

+Martin D Wells