

WE ARE NOT ALONE

Pentecost 25 – Cycle C

Haggai 1:15b – 2:9; Psalm 145; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

On the day of my ordination, Pastor Sheila Fletch gave me this gift, a small plaque with the message, “Life is a song. God’s love is the music.” I was deeply touched by Sheila’s gift, because it reflected her sensitivity to my ordination as a significant rite of passage from my former life as a musician to my new life as a pastor. As excited and happy as I was on the day of my ordination, I also felt the loss of the career to which I had devoted a huge part of my life. In a sense, Sheila’s gift built a bridge for me, allowing me to see how God’s love was the common thread in both my former life and my new life. It didn’t feel to me as if there were any continuity between my former life as a musician and my new life as a pastor; and I had a fair bit of anxiety concerning having a mixed identity: among other things, I, especially, would have to observe strict boundaries with the Directors of Music in the churches I served. But there was Sheila showing me that it is God’s love that lends integrity to our life story; that we live in God’s world, not a world of our own that we shape by good decisions and bad decisions, good timing or poor timing, by networking or chance and knowing or not knowing the right people. All my years at Zion, Stratford, this plaque hung by the door in my office, reminding me to trust in God’s grace and mercy; reminding me that life lived with a consciousness of God’s ever-present love is enough. One of our field-placement students from years gone by, Noreen Gullons, used to remind me that God, not the devil, is in the details. She would agree with Sheila that life is the song for which God’s love is the music – and that the two are inseparable, in spite of the fact that we may not be able to read the music as easily as we would like.

Clarity, faith, being able to read God’s love, know of God’s faithfulness, see God’s presence in everything we experience in life, good or bad, is a theme that comes to the surface in all of our readings this morning. The Hebrew exiles returned to Israel from Babylon in the year 539 BC, or BCE, the more-current terminology. Even their liberator, Cyrus of Persia and his successor, Darius I, encouraged the Hebrew people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem; to restore it as their centre of worship and heart of the city. But 19 years later, there had been no significant progress made. Haggai’s prophecy and his encouragement of the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest, Joshua, to rebuild the temple and to purify the practices of worship brought a new-found unity to the people and completed the restoration work by the year 515. But it was his vision of God as their co-worker that spoke most effectively to the spirituality of the task. “Work, for I am with you” suggests that as they cut stone and make mortar and gild the ornaments and carve the wood, they are not alone: God is with them, working by their side – trowel, chisel, hammer in hand, fully present in this song of renewal written for their life together.

The psalmist could easily have had the long view, remembering Solomon’s temple and seeing this temple rising up, more beautiful than before. “One generation shall laud your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts,” writes the psalmist, full of faith. How symbolic it was for the Hebrew people to be returned to their homeland after the exile and to have the temple rise before them as a reminder, a sign of God’s faithfulness to them; as a reminder that during all those years when they felt God had abandoned them the song continued and the music was at the ready; that they were not alone; that God’s love was as present for them in exile and in suffering as it had been for them in their founding years in which their faith was established and nurtured.

The author of 2 Thessalonians urges the congregation at Thessalonica not to be sidetracked by fear and unknowing; not to buy into messages that life as they know it is over and the end is near. He or she says to the faithful, “God has chosen you as the *first fruits* of salvation, both through your baptism and your faith. Your purpose is to proclaim the good news, not to be co-opted by the bad news. Stand firm and hold fast. The song is not over; the music is before you. Take up the song and play the music of God’s love for all to hear.”

And Jesus, in his encounter with the Sadducees, teaches that God’s love is not bounded by human life; that our life flows on in *endless song*, the song of God’s creating. We may have times in our lives when we can’t find the music, when we can’t hear the song, but God goes on singing it, Jesus tells the Sadducees. Our God is the God of the living, not the God of death.

In the years following my father's death, I could easily have been a Sadducee. As a young man, I had all kinds of issues that I hadn't dealt with, and then the profound grief I felt when he received his terminal diagnosis and then the almost-ten years following his death virtually destroyed my faith. The irony in my life was that I was a church musician, and didn't have the option of giving up on music itself or of leaving the church. I held God personally responsible for my father's early death and felt deeply God's absence in my life and in my experience.

Others, friends, loved ones, friends in Christ, went on singing the music of God's love, even though I covered my ears and kept my distance. Little by little, through their love, care, and faith, I was healed of all my anger and resentment and misunderstanding of God. Little by little, I discovered God in the details, and could identify a few grace-filled strains breaking into the noise of my apostasy.

It was in church one day that we used the new creed written by the United Church of Canada as an attempt to place in more contemporary terms who we were and who God was and is for us. It spoke to my heart, because it corrected all my negativity and poor theology. It began, "We are not alone, we live in God's world."

I thought of this dark period in my life when I read this morning's readings. They all proclaim God's presence and power at times when everyone in the account doubts and shuts out both song and music. The New Creed, as it is called, has been renewed several times since it was first written in 1968. It is our creed at worship today. May it sing to you as it sang to me of God's love and faithfulness, God's love and mercy, God's power and presence and unfathomable goodness.

[A *New Creed* appears on the next page.]

A NEW CREED

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We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.