

SLEEPWALKING WITH GOD

Pentecost 16, Year A: Matthew 21:23-32

I credit some of the ease with which I make the transition each summer from “Canadian Lutheran Pastor” to “Minister in the Church of Scotland” to the Rev. Bob Craig, who served my home congregation in St. Thomas from roughly the year after I was baptized to the year I was confirmed. Even though Bob’s Divinity degree was from McGill University in Montreal and the only church he served upon ordination was the United Church of Canada, I realized somewhere during my early twenties, that during his pastorate, he took our essentially Methodist congregation and shaped us into Church of Scotland Presbyterians – and probably into more of what is called the “high kirk” version of Church of Scotland Presbyterians at that. Bob himself was a Scot, receiving his undergraduate degree from the University of Edinburgh before immigrating to Canada. My guess is that his own spiritual formation occurred in one of the highly liturgical Church of Scotland parishes; and so, after ordination, he passed along to his congregations what he himself had received in his youth.

What brings all of this to mind is that he used to include “Comfortable Words” in our Holy Communion liturgy. And it wasn’t so much the sentences of Scripture themselves that caught my attention as it was their description in the order of service as “Comfortable Words.” “Comfortable Words” first appear in the Order for Holy Communion in the Church of England’s 1928 Book of Common Prayer: somehow they migrated either to the Church of Scotland or to the United Church of Canada, or both, most likely as options in the rite.

The word “comfortable” in the phrase “comfortable words” is used to mean “words that will give strength to the penitent” – “words with fortitude/words with strength”: “Come to me all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest... God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that those who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners... [and finally] if any sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins” [end quote].

Later that same life, a few years after becoming a Lutheran organist, I served for a Sunday at St. Andrew’s United Church in Sudbury. We were visiting my relatives in Sudbury; St. Andrew’s was their church, and since their organist had given his notice, my cousins arranged an unofficial audition for me during our visit. As it happened, it was one of the four times a year the congregation celebrated Holy Communion. Interestingly, this United Church congregation did as Lutherans do: they left their seats and came to the Table, and the minister walked the length of the Communion rail, personally administering the Sacrament to each person. As he did so, he recited the Comfortable Words from memory, over and over, in a singsong delivery that was nothing less than hypnotic. As I sat on the organ bench playing quiet music, I can remember being tempted to close my eyes and drift off as I listened to Charlie Forsyth drone on. The Comfortable Words were not only comforting and reassuring, they were also soothing and relaxing. I managed to stay awake, but barely.

It was reading today’s Gospel that set me thinking about how our expectation of church is more than just comforting words. At worship, Christians love the comfort of the familiar, comfortable chairs, bright sunlight softened with stained glass, warmth in the cold winter and air conditioning in the hot summer, warm water in the font (especially on Baptism Sundays), beautiful music, good order (Luther’s contribution to the church) – and the list goes on. We call this room a Sanctuary, meaning that it is a holy place or a place in which we celebrate the mysteries of faith; but “sanctuary” also suggests that this is a safe place, protected from the extremes of the world beyond our walls. “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,” the psalmist wrote, and we do not object. Whether we wish to admit it or not, church is a rather comfortable place, full of comfortable words and comfortable people.

And then, Jesus spoils it all by challenging us with a parable that suggests “discomfort” is one of the marks of authentic discipleship.

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir;” but he did not go.

Jesus directs his parable at the chief priests and elders in the temple who rejected John the Baptist's call to repent, a call to allow their faith to come alive in ways that would beg their transformation and the transformation of the world in which they lived into something more humane, more just. Like Jesus, John was a reformer who saw that faith in Israel's God had become too comfortable in the hands of the religious professionals at the Temple in Jerusalem. And, of course, those religious professionals, the chief priests and elders of today's Gospel, rejected John's call to repentance. In the same way, Jesus' radical proclamation of the good news of God was anything but "comfortable" for the chief priests and elders. It is no wonder they questioned his authority: the gospel Jesus proclaimed was anti-establishment, anti-institution, and anti-hierarchy, the very things that lent comfort to the Temple culture. Institutionalizing faith is always a mixed blessing, and Jesus was eloquent in describing how easily the "disturbing" and "prophetic" words of faith can be muted and compromised by institutions as they seek to perpetuate and preserve themselves; as they accrue power, influence, and wealth.

In Matthew's hands, however, today's parable is not just about the Temple culture, it is about all who hear Jesus' words, both the "comfortable" words and "disturbing" ones. The father's directive to his two sons to work in the vineyard is the call to discipleship – not just their call, but ours as well. We can be either of the two, but the one held up by Jesus as doing God's will is the one who, after refusing his father, reconsidered, and then got busy harvesting grapes. Very gently, today's parable suggests, nudges, provokes our discipleship. Like the father's request, we are to let this parable work on us just enough that we become uncomfortable with our comfort as a church and as individuals in community. Rather than sleepwalking with God, Jesus would have us wake up to the deep needs of the world in which we live – and then get busy in the vineyard that is our world.

Each Sunday, our prayers of intercession call us to action as environmentalists, as social activists, as peacemakers, as healers, and as companions to those in need of our love and care. Each Sunday, God's word restates our mandate as disciples of Jesus to embody his justice and mercy in the world in which we live. Each Sunday we encounter Jesus' real presence within and among us in the Sacraments. Today's parable asks that we not leave it all behind us when our hour of power ends; that like the first of the man's two sons, we allow all these "uncomfortable" words to work on us so that prayer leads to action, so that we become the very body of Christ broken or given for the deep needs of the world; of all those represented in our prayers.

One of the issues in this week's world news has been climate change and the need to do a 180° in how we live in the world; the biblical word for doing a 180° is "repent" meaning to turn from the direction in which we are going and turn to the opposite direction; to turn away from the ways of evil and turn toward the ways of God. If we listen to our critics, Canadians are sleepwalking through the environmental crisis; protecting everything but the natural world in order for our country to stay competitive, wealthy, powerful, and comfortable. The John the Baptists are not beyond our hearing, but do we allow their calls to work on us? Do we agree with their call to action, and do nothing? As those with a theology that sees the natural world as a gift from God, we have every reason to be uncomfortable with doing nothing; as those called to love God by loving our neighbour, we have reason to be uncomfortable with doing nothing; as those who pray weekly, perhaps daily for God's saving grace in our world, we have every reason to enter the vineyard and get busy as God's saving grace in our world.

Today, we rejoice in baptizing Jade. Most of the words in the rite are comfortable – words of adoption, of unconditional love, of forgiveness of sin, and the promise of everlasting life. But there are also words of call, words of invitation, and words of incorporation into the Body of Christ, the church. Today, Jade becomes a disciple, an apostle, a worker with us in the vineyard that is the world God loves so much. We have work to do, Jesus tells us and all the baptized. Sleepwalking with God is not an option.