

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 11, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary (Track II)

Isaiah 44:6-8 Psalm 86:11-17 Romans 8:12-25 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Hear the words of an ancient homily for Holy Saturday, attributed to a fourth-century bishop named Epiphanius:

Something strange is happening---there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. God has died in the flesh, and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, He has gone to free from sorrow captive Adam and Eve.

It's a powerful image, for a strange and powerful day. The whole earth keeping silence; all creation simply waiting, sleeping in solidarity with the God who had died. Holy Saturday is the in-between time: the pain and shock of Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday have passed, but the joy of the resurrection hasn't happened yet. The prayer book has no real liturgy for the day of Holy Saturday, only a brief optional service which takes less than fifteen minutes and which most parishes don't even use. And that's appropriate, somehow. There are times when all our words and all our actions are inadequate: when all we can do is keep vigil in silence, waiting for something that we can't even name.

And yet, even in the midst of our silence, God is at work. Quietly, imperceptibly. As Epiphanius preaches, even as his body lies dead in the ultimate sabbath rest, Jesus is accomplishing his greatest work of all: storming the gates of hell itself, passing deep into the realm of darkness and death, freeing Adam and Eve from their ancient captivity and restoring all of humanity to Paradise. To the human eye, all that is happening is slumber and stagnation in a lifeless tomb. Yet God's work of salvation is being carried out for those who have eyes to see it.

There's something Holy Saturday-like about our lives as Christians. Our confirmation class caught onto it, I think, when they were working on a class exercise to reenact the writing of the Nicene Creed—and we're using their creed in worship this summer. At one point in the conference, there was an argument about how to talk about the resurrection: if it was God's ultimate victory, why is there still so much suffering and evil in the world? The group debated for several minutes and eventually decided to say they believed in the resurrection as the "initial" triumph of God's love over evil and death, and in Christ's coming again as the time of "ultimate" triumph. There's a lot of territory between that "initial" and "ultimate." In the resurrection we have God's assurance that evil has been defeated once and for all. But as we live our lives in a world full of poverty and starvation, wars, addictions, disease, and the simple challenges of navigating our everyday conflicts with each other, it takes a lot of faith to see it. Waiting on God's time can feel slow and unproductive—like sitting around watching the grass grow. Or, maybe, sitting around waiting for a field of wheat to grow.

Jesus tells a parable today about wheat and weeds growing together in a field: good and evil, growing together so closely that their roots are entangled and they can't be separated. The exciting part comes at the end, when the harvest happens and things finally get set right: good wheat taken into the heavenly barn while the nasty weeds burn in hellfire. It's easy to read this parable as being about good people and bad people—but that's probably too simple. After all, Jesus says the weeds are created by the evil one, not by God. And no matter how bad a human being may be, he or she is still fundamentally God's creation. I imagine, instead, that the line between wheat and weed runs somewhere down the middle of each of us. Every one of us is created good. And yet each one of us is also invaded by the "weeds," those thoughts and actions that we choose in opposition to God's love. Every human being is a mixture of good and evil. And so, on our good days, we might imagine ourselves as wheat crying out to be freed from all our dark temptations.

Go ahead, rip out these weeds! Change me drastically overnight; get rid of all those parts of me that keep me from being my truest, purest self!

But God's response is unexpected. Wait with patience, God says. Let the good and bad grow together. They are so intertwined that to rip out the bad would destroy the good. It's wisdom that a good therapist or spiritual director would recognize. We can't deny or get rid of the dark and twisted places in our souls without doing irrevocable damage to ourselves: they are part of us. What we need, instead, is God's slow and patient work of healing and growth. It's Holy Saturday-type work: hidden, unimpressive, unseen.

St. Paul writes about waiting patiently for God today too, in his letter to the Romans. And Paul knew the temptation to rip out evil by the roots. He knew what it felt like to be utterly convinced of his own rightness. He began his religious career as a first-class weed destroyer, back in the days when he was a persecutor of the early Christian movement. He helped at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr, and then embarked on a vigilante operation to drag Christians into the courts from one city to the next. Back then, it was obvious to him that these followers of Jesus were evildoers. Their so-called Messiah was an executed criminal. They didn't even keep the Law properly. They were weeds in God's garden, and they had to be rooted out.

It took a dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus to open Paul's eyes to the truth. The evil wasn't other people out there. It was there in his own heart, in the impulse to condemn and destroy.

And so, from being a persecutor, Paul became one of the persecuted. He himself went on to undergo floggings and stonings in Jesus' name. So as he writes to the Christians at Rome, people who are themselves in danger of persecution, he knows what it is to suffer. And instead of responding to persecution with violence, he focuses on hope. Yes, he says, we are groaning with longing as we wait for God's triumph. And not only that, but the entire creation is groaning along with us, groaning in labor pains. Just like the process of childbirth, no one quite knows how long it will take. It's painful, and messy, and all you can do sometimes is just try to hold on. It's Holy Saturday work. But Easter is coming.

What does this mean for us? How do we live during this in-between time as followers of a Christ whose resurrection has changed everything—and yet the world still sometimes seems disappointingly the same? The everyday temptations, discouragements, and sufferings of our lives can sometimes feel like they're going to overwhelm us. Paul tells us to wait in patient expectation; Jesus portrays reapers waiting patiently for the harvest: it can seem as if we're being patted on the head and told to just be brave. And that's the kind of message that has been used so often in the service of oppression: religion as the opiate of the people, pie-in-the-sky promises used to keep people in their place.

But here's the difference. We are called to patience—not passivity. Faithfulness may not mean trying to pull up the weeds. But it does mean nurturing the wheat. Making God's harvest come about isn't our job. Neither is eradicating evil in the ways we happen to think best. What is our job is strengthening what is good. Any time we are engaged in the good work of caring for God's creation or God's people, we're watering God's field and helping prepare it for harvest. So work for justice. Clothe the naked. Feed the hungry. Tell the truth. Love one another. Sing a little. Tell stories. Care for the earth. Let yourself be surprised by God's presence in someone you thought was an enemy. And take heart: there is work for you to do, but it is not all up to you. God is saving the universe. All we have to do is give thanks and join in.

So hear the words of the Prayer Book: a prayer we pray on the dark night of Holy Saturday. It is the collect that follows the very last reading of the Great Vigil of Easter, just as the proclamation of Easter is about to burst forth. And listen to the word tranquillity ... and hear the good news that the one bringing all things to perfection is Jesus, not you or me.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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