

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
Gospel Reading: Matthew 28:16-20
June 7, 2020



A little over 1,000 years ago, St. Anselm of Canterbury, archbishop and leading theologian of the church encouraged followers of Jesus to have ‘faith seeking understanding’. It was an invitation to a living faith, alive to the nature of the world around us and alive to God’s revelation within it. Alive to the world, alive to God. It seems to me that we could do with some Anselm in our bloodstream right now.

For the 11th century theologian, the sort of faith that “merely believes what it ought to believe” is “dead”, for this kind of faith whose talk about God has been settled beforehand, has literally lost its will to live. We need our faith to be more than that, especially now. We need it to be the animating principle it is intended to be for human flourishing and goodness. Today, at this current moment of crisis and pain in America, we don’t need a faith that is as good as dead; we need something real, and present, and awake.

With over 100,000 human souls departed this life in this country and over 350,000 worldwide, and with tens of millions struggling to see the light ahead, we need to dig deeper into our lives of faith to identify where a hope that really is hope might be found. Furthermore, the tragic events of these past few weeks have demonstrated once again that my chances, as a white man, of walking down a street, or jogging around my neighborhood, or driving in my car, and coming home again alive and unharmed, are many times greater than for a black man, simply because of the pigmentation of my skin. It is abundantly clear that we need a faith that is alive to understanding why these centuries-old inequities are clearly and continuously present among us.

What might such a living faith look like? It might empower us to name the sinful structures of a society that has for far too long lived with the audacious lie that all people are seen as equal, and that there is indeed liberty and justice for all by equal measure. What’s more, it might be a faith that seeks to understand why these have been the untruths we have been willing to live by for so long.

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To have faith that seeks understanding is to have an active love of God that seeks a deeper knowledge of God. It is to have an active love of the world that seeks a deeper understanding of our place in that world. And most crucially in today's time of fracture along racial lines, to have faith that seeks understanding is to have an active love of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and of every beloved child of God who has lost their life, caught up as it has been in our failure to have a reckoning with one another about how it is we are here, once again.

To have that kind of faith, we must be willing to get under the surface of our news feeds and political preferences and ask what it is about this particular part of God's world that leads us to incarcerate and under-educate and over-prosecute black people. We will need to examine with one another with thoughtfulness and care the question as to why we have so few black leaders in our judicial system and in the structures of Government. We will need to be open to asking why it is that in churches like this one across our denomination, and in white mainline protestantism as a whole, there are so few black rectors and senior pastors.

In other words, a faith that seeks understanding is a faith that puts us to work. And I know that such work, such soul-searching and self-reflection, especially when carried out among others with openness and honesty, is hard and not a little unnerving. Yet the Church is exactly the place for this kind of shared work to be done. As the Prayer Book reminds us, the mission of the Church is to reconcile the world to God and people to one another. In a way, as much as we miss being with one another, it is helpful that the pews are currently left vacant. Pews can be deceiving. Church is not a delivery system for religious knowledge from pulpit to nave, it is God's holy vessel for the reformation of the world. A high target, I know, but the Gospel calls upon our lives to be nothing less than a new creation, a living emblem of the kingdom God, in lament yet alive to joy, in despair yet awake to hope. In this way, the Church - the gathered and dispersed community of Christ - is what Trinity looks like when your faith seeks to understand the mystery of the divine life in the flesh and blood of your fellow human being.

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As such, the Church should comfort us, and it should challenge us. It should shelter us under its wings, and it should propel us out into the world. At its heart, it is God's recovery movement for a world addicted and in bondage to the slaveries of oppression and violence and the will to hold power over others. It is called to be God's embodied renewal of the Earth, unleashing the transformative power of self-sacrificial love. And it is intended to be God's prophetic voice that will find a way out of no way, trusting in the living presence of Christ risen, ascended and moving among us in the Spirit.

Still, all of this can seem distant from our daily living. Great for the pulpit on Sunday, hard to see a way through to it at work or at home or in our neighborhood on Monday. Add in a global pandemic, with seismic shifts in life all around us, and the incapacity of human leadership to offer the confidence we are all craving in public life, then the work of racial reconciliation and self-giving love can seem beyond the pale right now.

And it would be, if the story we are called to tell to the world was truly about us. Thankfully, as Evelyn Underhill wrote to Anselm's 20th century successor as Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Lang, in 1931, 'the interesting thing about religion is God'. The hope we have to offer such a fractured world as ours is not our best thought for social renewal and justice on the earth, but in the God in whom we live and move and have our being. We don't need a Church that will tell the world how to fix itself, we need a Church that will live deep within the Kingdom, fluent and familiar with the contours of the Spirit's movement on the Earth; that same Spirit who brooded over creation at the beginning of all things.

Our scriptures tell us through the stories of creation in Genesis that God intends order and unity and mutuality to lie at the heart of this world's existence. To recall those stories this morning is to recall our vocation to join in God's restoration of that created order, to be reconcilers of the divisions among us in society, and to practice a mutuality where, by grace, we learn to give ourselves away to others and see their story as our story - to see Ahmaud and George Breonna's stories as our stories too.

To live a Genesis sort of faith, is to live a faith that remembers our common origins, and our utter equality before God, and to strive to course-correct all that denies that equality in our own lives. To profess a faith in a Triune God is to say to the world that we are willing to enter into that same divine movement of self-donating love ourselves, not merely in imitation of God, but through and with God. God's grace is how we wake up to the truth about ourselves and the true nature of this broken world.

Let us not show the world our contempt, our judgment, our self-righteousness. Let us show it our love, our longing for healing among us, and just how much we are willing to trust in the resurrection hope we find in Christ whose love even death could not defeat.

I am hopeful for the future of our communities, here and everywhere, because I believe that God is real, and trustworthy, and faithful. 'I am with you always, to the end of the age', is Matthew's last word to us. God with us, with Ahmaud, with George, with Breonna, with every family who mourns a loved one, with you, with me, forever. What else do we need?