

Sermon for Layreaders
Morning Prayer: Second Sunday after Easter

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The First Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11.

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

The Second Lesson: St. John 10:1-10.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto

them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Text:

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together....”
Isaiah 40:5.

Development:

What do you think of when you hear that? Do you think of some great spectacular opening of the heavens to reveal the throne of God and an army of angels announcing that anyone who does not bow down before that throne will be destroyed? Or will it be something more gentle but no less spectacular, like the appearance in the sky of the face of Christ? Or do you perhaps think of something like the opening and closing of the Olympics in Beijing, which revealed the glory of modern China?

In any event, the glory of the Lord is revealed in the Bible in much less spectacular ways. The prophet Elijah experienced the glory of the Lord during the darkest days not only of his own life but of the life of Israel. The nation had adopted the pagan religion of the queen and had set up idols in the temple itself. Elijah was hiding out in a cave when he complained to God, “the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away.”

The Lord told Elijah to stand at the mouth of the cave. There he witnessed a mighty windstorm that uprooted trees and precipitated landslides, “but the Lord was not in the wind....”

Then came an earthquake, “but the Lord was not in the earthquake....”

Then came an enormous fire, “but the Lord was not in the fire....”

Finally there came a tiny little voice. The voice told Elijah what to do and assured him that he was not the only one who remained firm in the midst of the apostasy of Israel. “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed unto Baal [“BUH-awl”], and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”

The glory of God was revealed in that tiny voice, and that glory consisted of God’s ability to enable a remnant of his people to survive the attempt to eliminate all traces of true religion. The truth of God cannot and will not ever be destroyed. That is his glory.

This incident with Elijah in the cave is neither the first nor the last incident of the revelation of the glory of God as survivability in the face of destruction. The experience of Moses at the burning bush is an early example. The bush was on fire. It should have been destroyed, but it was not. It was out of that bush that God spoke to Moses as the eternal and indestructible one whose name is I AM.

When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel, he looted the temple and razed it to the ground. He then carried off the leaders and people of faith to Babylon where they became slaves and were required to worship false gods. But once again, God preserved for himself a faithful remnant, and when Babylon fell to the Persians, that faithful remnant returned to Jerusalem to reclaim the land and rebuild the temple. That was an enormous task, but in this morning’s lesson, the prophet encourages them to overcome all obstacles — fill in the valleys, level the mountains, smooth out the rough terrain, demonstrate to the world that the glory of the Lord consists of His eternal being which is evidenced in His ability to survive and prevail in spite of all efforts to destroy Him and His people.

There have been many modern attempts to bring about the death of God. For twenty years all religious activity was forbidden in Albania. Churches were destroyed. Christians, Jews, and Muslims were imprisoned and killed. Enver Hoxha [“HOTCH-ah”], the Communist leader, proclaimed Albania the first fully atheist state, “completely cleansed”, as he put it, “from all religion.” But there are churches there today and they are asking for their property back.

During the reign of Stalin and his successors, the Russian Orthodox Church went underground. When the Communist government collapsed, Eduard Shevardnaze [“SHEH-var-d-NAD-zee”], head of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia was baptized.

The church is under persecution today in Muslimdominated countries, and there is even lot of hostility in our own country, where church attendance and membership is in decline, but the glory of God remains, even when it is hidden.

St. Paul talks about seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He related that manifestation of the glory of God to the creation in which God causes light to emerge out of darkness. Both he and St. John consistently relate the glory of God to the death and resurrection of Jesus. His triumph over evil and death was won by a kind of strategy that only the Word of God in human form could execute.

The world attempts to protect itself from evil by avoiding it or deflecting it. The glory of a nation or of an individual seems to consists of being able to hide behind armies and walls and worldly wealth. The glory of God is that he overcomes evil, not by avoiding it but by submitting to it, absorbing it, and rising above it. That is why our prayer of consecration begins as it does: “All glory be unto thee, Almighty God our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption.”

Conclusion:

The good news for us who follow Christ is that we share in his glory. Jesus says of his church that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. We usually interpret that in terms of the ability of gates to keep people out, but gates also have the ability to keep people in. The gates of Egypt could not keep God’s people in, and the gates of Babylon could not keep God’s people in, and the gates of Hell cannot keep God’s people in either.

We need not be afraid to join our Lord on His cross because that cross represents the last desperate attempt of evil to prevail over good, of sin to prevail over righteousness, of error to prevail over truth, and of worldly power to prevail over the power of God. That attempt has always failed and always will because the glory of God, which is always present even when it is hidden, cannot be destroyed. That glory is the source of light and life. All who follow Christ to His cross are heirs of that glory. Through him and by His power, we too can prevail over every evil force that would bind us and destroy us. In so far as we do, the glory of God is revealed in us for all the world to see.

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1 I Kings 19:10b (KJV).

2 I Kings 19:11b (KJV).

3 I Kings 19:11b (KJV).

4 I Kings 19:11b (KJV).

5 I Kings 19:18 (KJV).

6 Exodus 3:2-14.