

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 23, 2022

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministries and School Chaplain*

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Dig deeper

As I was growing up, one of my favorite summer seaside activities was digging. With my father I was often seen with a great big spade digging deep into the sand in search of ‘treasure’. On occasion we would unearth a surprise: an old coin, a shell, fragments of paper or seaweed, a piece of an old clay pot, and plenty of glass smoothed into beautiful, translucent shapes by the sea. Finding such a ‘reward’ was certainly a motivation to continue, and in the world of my young imagination, eventually arrive in Australia! While some of my friends became more sophisticated in this endeavor, and went on to buy shiny new metal detectors, this seemingly rhythmic, futile treasure seeking activity continued with my own children and still exists across generations, whether on the shores of England, or by the Lake at Incarnation Camp, CT. Whether digging to create a moat for one’s castle, that with one heavy footprint could be destroyed, or digging relentlessly for ‘treasure’, such persistence in digging, such seeking, never feels futile, irrespective of the outcome.

Turning now to a rather different sandy terrain, which we recently saw on our Parish Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I wonder what it was like to unearth a different type of treasure, treasure stored in terracotta jars: the Dead Sea Scrolls? Scrolls that were initially discovered in the 1940’s by a Bedouin shepherd, and latterly by archeologists who took their time, persisted in digging deep only to discover multiple ancient, mainly Hebrew, also Aramaic and Greek, parchment and some papyrus fragments of manuscripts, in caves in Qumran on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. These hundreds of pieces of treasure, of scripture dating from the third century BC to the first century BC, brought these explorers up close and physically in touch with the word of God. Can you imagine what it felt like to unearth such a find? For never before had a such a vast literary treasure come to light, the word of God for the world.

You may be wondering why I am talking discovering scripture, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, other than that we heard about scrolls in our first reading. It is because digging deep in order to discover and rediscover the word of God in our lives, is a current theme for many churches across the Anglican Communion this week and next, on a day honored and named, Bible Sunday. While we may not have set aside this day before, we know that for Episcopalians, scripture is at the heart of our faith, of our hymnody, our Common Prayer and made familiar by the three-year Lectionary cycle and rhythm of the Daily Office. Its power is honored in worship, and we uphold that by the grace of the holy spirit. The very presence of Jesus is indeed found in our sacraments and yes, the word. The same word we treasure, we rise up in our processions, surround with incense, kiss, and honor not as a dead sea, but living word of which the Apostle Paul says, “This is the word of faith we are proclaiming.” A word which underpins our beliefs and profession of faith in Jesus Christ, in our lives and yes, in our preaching from this very pulpit.

The preaching of the gospel is still one key way for our loving God to speak to the world. It was the preaching of the gospel that was the means of converting thousands upon the Day of Pentecost. It was the preaching

of the gospel which overthrew the idols of ancient Rome. It was the preaching of the gospel which brought about Reformation. "The Word," said Martin Luther over and over again, "it was the Word that did it all." A word which challenges and comforts, instructs and calls, gives hope, and as we heard Paul say earlier, "The very word is near you; it speaks and resides in you." The very word of God which bears a call to faith that involves our head and heart, our whole being. A story that urges us to remember and respond to all that has been and spoken, recorded and enacted within our Salvation history. A word which tells a story of God's deep rooted unconditional love for us, and is personified in the word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

We also know that this same honored scripture can be dangerous, if interpreted with no exegesis, or recognition of contexts. Such reading doesn't honor the Word who brings us and shows us love. We have all heard of occasions when individual verses or texts have been presented to suit the convictions of individuals and groups, to justify and inform behaviors. We have all heard scripture quoted in an attempt to control and to exclude people from God's love, to justify oppression and exploitation, from slavery and colonization, to racism, nationalism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. As Fr. Schultz only reminded us this morning and in our noon day mass on Friday, How far those things are removed from what the Good News of Jesus Christ is really about, for the good news of Jesus Christ is a message of love, a love which time and time again proclaims there is no difference between Jew and Greek, Gentile, servant or free.... we are all his beloved. Loved by the same Lord who is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.

Scripture too is powerful. It can motivate and inspire people to take a leap of faith, to enter a life of transformative service, and yet it is simultaneously refuted or banned in multiple countries across the globe, where even possessing a bible leads to persecution.

You may have heard of a Dutch missionary, Brother Andrew, "God's Smuggler," who recently died. His life honored God's call to him to take the word of God to persecuted and neglected churches around the world. There was always an urgency in his mission. In his blue VW he crossed the border into European Communist countries and prayed on his way, risking his own life in order to deliver treasure, the good news of Jesus to those for whom it was buried, out of sight, banned.

He carried in his hands, on his lips and in his heart the powerful words of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, the good news of a loving God, a God that brings hope.

I don't know about you, but this is something I know I take for granted at times. So often I hear the word, sing the word, say the creeds, with my lips and even know them by heart, but I am also reminded on this Bible Sunday, unless I, we honor or treasure the word, spend time and allow it to speak to our lives, we may well be missing something important.

Perhaps if we were to return to the early practice of our faith, of digging a little deeper into the scriptures, or spending a little longer, persisting with the word, on our own or in preparing for a service, might we too really unearth a renewed message as treasure for our time, our day. If we just tried immersing ourselves in God's word a little more, might our faith be more alive and active, and connected to our world?

As we heard in the Gospel reading on St. Luke's day, last Tuesday, as Jesus entered the temple, he held out his hand to receive a scroll, he proclaimed the word, the familiar text from Isaiah, his mission statement perhaps. A word which called his listeners to bring good news to poor, the hungry, widowed and prisoner and blind, to those on the edge. This is not a passive story. Like much of scripture it contains a powerful, radical call that invites a response. I wonder if we really took scripture seriously and read it as the living not dead sea word, how maybe more urgently might we respond to the plight of those in need, including those little children who just this week were lining up outside 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church only wearing shorts, or arriving at St Mary's door with no winter clothes.

Rest assured, Bible Sunday is not simply an altar, or pulpit call. Neither is it a recruitment drive for Friday Bible Study, or Contemplative reading, though I highly recommend all of these.

Bible Sunday is however an invitation to dig deeper into scripture, to rediscover that time reading, listening, reflecting and learning from the Bible is never futile, but often surprising. Who knows what treasure we might find if we try? And in responding to this invitation, may we know not only more about the word of God, but grow in faith through knowing the Word that too became flesh and dwells among us.