“The Same Yesterday and Today and Forever”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise. (Walter Chalmers Smith, 1867)*

To what shall we compare the Kingdom of God? God, is *most* blessed, *most* glorious; is *almighty*, and is *victorious* . . . I wonder if you also are wondering how and when we will know God’s victory in a time in which we know the death of children, and again the death of children, and again the death of children, by guns in our own nation where it has been the leading cause of death since 2020, and by starvation and bombings in Gaza, bombings and shootings in Ukraine and Israel, and with countless children serving as soldiers in Sudan and elsewhere. How and when will we know God’s victory? Where will see glimpses of the Kingdom of God?

I have had several reasons to consider the words of what we know now as the Philippian hymn, in which we hear these words: Philippians 2:5-11

**5**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

**6**Who, being in very nature God,
    did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
**7**rather, he made himself nothing
    by taking the very nature of a servant,
    being made in human likeness.
**8**And being found in appearance as a man,
    he humbled himself
    by becoming obedient to death—
        even death on a cross!

**9**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
    and gave him the name that is above every name,
**10**that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
**11**and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
    to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but *emptied* himself, as many translations read. We human beings don’t like serving others, though, do we? We human beings don’t like bowing down to anyone, even God, do we? We human beings are pretty good at wishing ourselves into the highest places or into places of abundance measured by control, by ownership, and by influence. What kind of an upside-down place must be the Kingdom of God, and how *in the world* do we become part of such a place, in which *peace*, God’s *peace* may be found?

In the Protestant tradition, books like Sirach, likely written in around the third century BCE, are known as what we call The Apocrypha, or those texts not part of the accepted canon (known to be hidden, from which their title comes. As Marsha and I noted, neither of us have ever read them during worship before now. They *have* been read in the Christian tradition through the ages, however, in both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches, as they reveal what some of the sages of second temple period. And just a quick note for our understanding, they didn’t make the cut into the canon because of their being originally written in Greek rather than Hebrew. That can be a conversation for another time, though. For our consideration today, though, it is clear why those who organized our scripture readings include it. We see in it as well as in our Gospel lesson and very directly in the letter to the Hebrews that what *God* does and what *God* wants for us is not what we are seeing in our nation or the wider world today.

What we do see today is so often like the example we know in Luke, in which we are cautioned against seeking to elevate ourselves. That kind of prideful behavior is the road to ruin, as we hear in Sirach, as well. If we, instead, empty ourselves of pride and ambition, as Jesus did, we might see reflected in our world the confidence that comes from being united with God, trusting in God’s provision. Our own seeking, through overblown ambition and violence, does not bring about the peace God promises us. Instead, if we act as the writer of Hebrews invites us to behave, we may see earlier glimpses of the tomorrow in which Jesus remains the same. We are to imitate Christ, who is still the same, and still calls us to the same life, recognizing our almighty, victorious *God*. The writer of Hebrews could not be any more direct, could he? “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2**Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. **3**Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

I haven’t visited anyone in prison lately, though I believe I should. And how is it that I am to love my brothers and sisters? We *are* our brothers and sisters keepers, and I recently find myself wondering what might be my response to each and every occasion of violence in the world if my original family members, or my children were one of those whose lives were lost? How would I be beating down the doors of government and of every aid agency if my daughters were dying of hunger? Does the Kingdom of God look like Minneapolis, or Gaza City, or the Nova Festival? What kind of ruler will take us there?

I read the various aphorisms on a favorite coffee mug this week, this time finding myself rewriting the familiar line from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* that begins “It is a truth universally acknowledged that . . .” we human beings are pretty well bound to harm one another. I don’t imagine that I am alone in my frustration, my anger, my sadness, and my increased determination lately? Am I also not alone in feeling like there is nothing that I really can do to help in a significant way, despite feeling moved to *do something*? When we hear in Hebrews direct statements about how we are to behave, we are told even more powerfully that in following God’s desires for our lives, we will not need to worry. Our passage for today moves to a close with this reminder: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” **6**So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’”

Well, we mortals do a great deal to one another, and our love of money, of power, of control and security at the expense of compassion turns God’s world upside down. Still, Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, and we are called to be like Jesus, to live as Jesus lived. So, how will we move to turn our world rightside up today? How, by emptying ourselves, by actively choosing to be servants of those who have and are “the least,” will be a part of bringing about God’s Kingdom today? How will we make certain that the children may live to proclaim God’s goodness? Let’s talk about it together. Let us pray for those who act, and be grateful for the prayers of those whose action is prayer. Let those of us who are moved to give voice to the voiceless do so, and let each one of us, in so doing, give praise to God, whose Kingdom we pray will come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.