ASC, Epiphany 1 year A January 5, 2020

I’ve been battling lately with fear, with near apocalyptic concerns about justice, the environment, leadership— and maybe you have too. The US and most places in the world are struggling with how to respond to violence and terrorism, systemic racism, climate change, technological and social upheaval. In this country, the news is full of the different ways our elected leaders and future presidential hopefuls are responding to these issues and challenges. Some feed the fear, warning those more privileged to circle the wagons, push away those who would challenge their sense of security, shut down those who cry out for fairness and support. Others call for demonstrations against injustice, for outreach and rallying, for insistence on radical change to social and financial systems. And still others try to strike a middle ground, appealing to reason and pragmatism, asserting that we can resolve these problems with negotiation and perseverance.

We’re all considering the kind of leader we think this country needs and whom we personally want to follow into a future full of challenges. All of us have a great stake in who is elected; but it can feel confusing to know who will be able to bring more justice and sustainability to the economy, the environment, and the world order. These issues often feel too big for me to manage, so usually I focus on ways I can try to make a difference or a change in my more intimate context- personal relationships and local issues. In a few moments, we will renew our baptismal vows and be reminded that we are each called to be leaders, to be stepping out in courage and faith, standing up against wrong, wherever we are.

So what makes a great leader? The prophet Isaiah’s words today preach a vision of God’s leadership, characterized not by dominance but by by loving care; Isaiah describes a leader who works for justice, who opens the eyes of the blind and frees prisoners from the dungeon, who leads by holding our hands and guiding us toward the light. Great leaders know they have to believe in and follow something larger than themselves- a mission of justice, a vision of community- that gives their work meaning and their journey direction.

In the Gospel lesson today, John was reluctant to baptize Jesus because he knew he was there to prepare the way for Jesus who was the greater leader. But Jesus came to John to be baptized as a sign that his leadership was not for himself but for God. Both John and Jesus, like all true leaders, point beyond themselves to something greater.

Jesus, like all of us, needed encouragement and blessing to do his work. God anointed Jesus for leadership not by giving him weapons or wealth, or political power, but by reminding him he was loved and that God would always be with him in his work. God’s love and blessing strengthened him to become the kind of leader who brings hope to suffering people, who helps us face our fears and trust in God, who shows us that love, healing, and respect- not dominance or violence- make us stronger and wiser.

After his baptism, Jesus began a ministry of teaching and healing. His words and actions inspired people to follow him because they wanted to share in the vision of hope and freedom the prophets had written about and Jesus was preaching about. And God’s Spirit gave his disciples the strength and the power to keep following, despite persecution and conflict, and to keep leading others onward toward God’s dream of justice and inclusion. True leadership, and discipleship, build up love and courage, join people together and move them forward.

Next week we celebrate the legacy of one of our country’s great leaders, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We will see pictures and hear speeches, and some of us even remember thousands of people on marches, at rallies, all wanting to follow him, listen to him, respond to his call to justice and freedom, and the difficult path of non-violence. He did not preach fear or hatred, exclusion or mockery. And like Jesus’ disciples, Martin Luther King had no forethought plan to become a martyr or a great hero; like them he followed God’s call to him, one step at a time, not perfectly but faithfully, until the vision of God’s justice, inclusion, and peace he shared became bigger than him.

Listen to the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a man in his thirties, a man who, like Jesus, would never reach the age of 40 because of his courage and vision; listen to some of his words as he accepted the Nobel Peace prize in 1964:

*I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts him.*

*I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.*

*I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction.*

*I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.*

*I believe that even amid today's motor bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men.*

*I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land.*

*"And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid."*

*I still believe that we shall overcome.*

*This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.*

I am struck by how timely and vivid those words still are, 56 years later; only the male centered language hints at his speaking in a different time. In our time, when it’s hard to hear many voices of hope and courage, when the US is struggling to realize it cannot find long term security just in wealth or military domination, I hope we can re-commit ourselves to our best and truest values of liberty and justice for all.

I hope also that we as people of faith can learn from the divisive, hate-filled, fearful language of our political discourse to deepen our commitment to God’s call to us to be leaders of hope, to be the light, a beacon for others seeking meaning and dignity in their lives.

Brother David of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, who visited with us this past fall, wrote recently:

*Some­times the word of God to us in a particular situation is not quite the message we were hoping for. We don’t get the feeling from read­ing their stories that Moses was thrilled when God named him the new leader of Israel, or even that Jesus himself embraced his call without dreading what it would demand from him. And yet, with every challenge there comes a promise; with every call there is an assurance of God’s strength present in our weakness.*

The best leaders, those we can trust and learn from, those who energize us and make us want to serve and work, are the ones who themselves are followers, followers of God’s call to bring hope and peace and justice to all people and all creation.

As we discern the ways and places we are being called to lead and follow, in our communities and the larger culture and country we live in, what is our part in making real God’s dream of love and care for all, God’s vision of justice for the whole world? It’s a high and fearful calling, but hear the words of the Psalm today- “The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice…. The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.” And hear the Word of God for you: “You are my child, my beloved. and with you I am well pleased. “ With that love and that promise, we can do and be more than we can expect or imagine.

**Amen**.