

The Rev. M. Cristina Paglinauan  
Sermon for Proper 15, Lectionary C  
Jeremiah 23:23-39  
Hebrews 12: 1-7(8-10)11-14  
Luke 12:49-56  
Church of the Redeemer, Aug. 14-15, 2010  
p. 1

Fire on the earth! Stonings and floggings! Division and strife in families! What a set of readings for a new associate – in charge of children, youth and family ministries – to get for my first weekend preaching here at Redeemer!

And for anyone who, like me, tends to avoid conflict and enjoys keeping the peace; who likes making people happy, especially my friends and family; and who tends to connect avoiding conflict and keeping the peace with what it means to be Christian, these readings are particularly challenging!

I mean, after all, isn't the one we claim to follow as Christians *the* Prince of Peace?

“The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.” We just sung these words a few moments ago. *What does this exactly mean?* However you might interpret these words, they certainly are *not* the words that will get folks up and out of bed to come to church on a Sunday morning! And they are hardly the words that, say, a PR firm in charge of marketing God and the way of Christ would choose to put on a billboard! Or on a pop-up screen on the Internet!

Imagine the pictures and images that would pop-up alongside the words GOD'S PEACE: STRIFE IN SOD. Images like those of “Young John, who homeless in Patmos died; and Peter, who head down was crucified.” Doing a Google search of Christian martyrs throughout the centuries would pull up countless images and stories of early Christian martyrs and saints with names like Cyprian and Polycarp, Blandina and Perpetua; and modern day martyrs, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and like Gayle Williams, the British aid-worker shot and killed in Afghanistan in 2008, accused of “preaching Christianity”.

But perhaps these images of human beings who followed Christ as THE WAY -- all the way to their own persecutions and martyrdoms -- perhaps these images are either too grand, or frankly, too stark and too scary for those of us here in this chapel today who are ... very simply and very humbly... searching ... seeking ... stumbling ... doubting ... believing ... trying to live a good life ... and seeing, in the way of God through Christ, some kind of key to what this might mean. “I'm not trying to lead a revolution or to convert or save anyone!” we might say. “I'm certainly no saint and have no desire to be one! And I sure don't plan on being martyred! I'm just trying to make my way in this crazy journey we call life, living as a human being on earth.”

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This is exactly what I was doing – trying to make my way as a human being and a humble follower of Christ – when I found myself depressed in medical school in the winter of 1996.

I should have felt like I was on top of the world. I'd finally gotten into medical school and had been elected president of my class. My classmates and friends were bright, compassionate and interesting people. I was learning fascinating things about the human body

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p. 2

and about science that would help me make sick people feel better. And my mom and dad, who were both doctors, were happy and proud of me.

I remember a particularly cold and dreary gray morning that fall. I was lying in bed and staring out my window, when I noticed the bare branches of a tree standing just beyond the window pane. I noticed how these branches moved, swaying this way and that, with the blowing of the wind. And as the branches swayed and the wind blew, I found myself envying the wind.

The wind was free. Free to go wherever it pleased. Not trapped like I felt. Trapped and imprisoned in my own life.

And as I became aware of my thoughts – aware of a growing emptiness that seemed to consume more and more of me day after day - I grew more sad and more depressed; so depressed I couldn't walk into a grocery store without wandering aimlessly through the aisles, not knowing why I was there, lost and consumed in my own inner world. I couldn't speak to my closest friends without crying and telling them how miserable I was, yet I didn't quite understand why. I no longer remembered what it felt like to wake up with a sense of joy, a sense of wonder, a sense of purpose. Instead I felt dull, lifeless, hollow and empty.

It was only after an intense period of self-introspection – a period which included journal-writing; talking on the phone with my closest friends; reading two helpful books (M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* and James Hillman's *The Soul's Code*); seeing a psychotherapist; praying for God's guidance and staying quiet enough, long enough, to listen to what God, through my heart, was speaking to me in the silence -- it was only after this intense period of allowing myself to delve into the depths of my own abyss and strife that I realized the truth of my situation.

I had gone to medical school for a variety of different reasons. It was a noble and respectable profession. It would earn me a good living. And it would make my parents happy and so very proud of me. But I had been so busy playing the role of the self-directed, self-confident and successful Bryn Mawr/ Harvard grad, and so busy playing the role of the dutiful daughter, that I had completely neglected to hear, or even notice, the truth of my own soul.

The fact was, I didn't really *know* who I was, what I really wanted. I had never really thought about what my natural, God-given gifts and talents were, nor had I ever really paid much attention to the question: *What brings me joy? And what do I do naturally that brings joy to others?* It had felt good to tell people that I knew what I wanted to be and knew where I was going, that I had a direction in life, when the truth was, I didn't. And what my depression revealed to me was that for too long, for lack of a better metaphor, I had been trying to cram a size five shoe onto my size eight foot. I – the essence of who I was – who I *am* - was bursting to be free.

And so on a cold winter day in the winter of 1997, after selling or giving away anything I couldn't cram with me into my car, I left medical school and headed west, not sure where I was

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p. 3

going or what I'd be doing, just knowing that I had friends across the country with whom I could stay along the way.

You'll notice, perhaps, that at this point in my journey, I chose not to go home to my family here in Baltimore. My parents at the time were just too upset and of course, they were extremely worried. I knew I needed to be away and separated from them for a time, in order to find my own way.

Clearly over time and after a myriad of turnings, after some doors closing and other doors opening, I *did* find my way, back home to Baltimore. My parents, who retired last December after more than thirty years of practicing medicine, eventually came around and have come to accept, if not completely understand, my own life's choices; and they were joyfully present both at my graduation from seminary and my ordination to the transitional diaconate last June. I do hope, one day soon, they will come to a service here at Redeemer.

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I share this with you today as my own living witness to the truth of today's Gospel. The call of God in Christ -- to be your authentic self -- to be who God created you to be, with your gifts and talents, shortcomings and limitations -- did indeed cause strife in my family, dividing daughter from mother, and daughter from father. The peace of God ... and the joy ... that I carry with me today, serving the people of God here at Redeemer, came at a price.

What's more, I know that each of you has your own individual life stories: of choices made and choices yet to be made; and perhaps most difficult of all, those choices that you wish you could make but for a host of different reasons are unable to make in the present, and so perhaps you are simply living, day by day, as best as anyone can.

*The way of Christ – the Christian walk – is, ultimately, at its heart, a journey of transformation. It is a call to live, day by day, choice by choice, more fully into the children of God we were created to be. The way is arduous and painful at times, joyful and peaceful at others.*

The Good News is that wherever we are along The Way, at whatever stage -- whether we are through a life crisis or still in one; whether we are treading water or making strides – *God in Christ is with us.*

*God in Christ is with us* in community: in the people, friends and family, and strangers who accompany and challenge us along The Way. *God in Christ is with us* in the various life circumstances and experiences that present themselves to us everyday. *God in Christ is with us* in the “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us. And *God in Christ is with us* in our times of deepest depression and our times of greatest joy and celebration.

In just a few moments we will gather around our Lord's table, where we will encounter *God in Christ with us* in the heavenly food and drink we will share together as the living,

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p. 4

breathing Body of Christ. Let us rejoice and be glad! And let us pray that by God's grace and sustenance, God's transforming love will continue to transform our lives.

Amen.