

Chapel of St. James the Fisherman. 10.ix.17
Proper 18A (Ex 12:1-14; Ps 149; Rom 13:8-14, Mt 8:15-20)
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This is a tough time, isn't it? Even as we bask in the gentle September weather and quiet of Cape Cod, we're aware of distress throughout the world. In Texas and Florida, two horrifying hurricanes have struck within a month: one bearing incredible amounts of water causing an almost biblical deluge; the other, with almost unheard-of winds, is causing devastating damage even as we worship on a sunny morning here—and a third storm is looming on the Caribbean horizon. The most severe earthquake of over a century has struck in Mexico (and is all but ignored in the United States, which is preoccupied with hurricanes). Forest fires rage in the West. North Korea and the United States threaten each other with nuclear war in a situation that has no good foreseeable outcome—even conventional warfare would have unspeakable consequences for the Korean peoples. The Middle East is in turmoil with sectarian conflict, rampant terrorism, and (almost ignored) human suffering. Tribal Afghanistan, which western powers have attempted in vain to pacify for two centuries, roils. Our own country is deeply divided and suffers an outburst of racism and xenophobia, which had been misleadingly under wraps for several decades. Less cosmic, but still upsetting, Roger Federer and Venus Williams left the courts of the US Open too soon. And Bob [Walters], how are the Patriots doing?

What is it that Jesus says in Matthew? Bad as things are, "the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And

because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." [Mt. 24:3-31]

After this sermon was drafted, I saw an article yesterday in the *New York Times* with the headline "Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Nature's Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven." They quoted John Scalzi: "These aren't the End Times, but it sure as hell feels like the End Times are getting in a few dress rehearsals right about now."

The reading from Exodus this morning is about getting ready for a catastrophe. We usually think of the Passover as the triumph of God's people over oppression and slavery in Egypt. But it is also for the Israelites a flight for their lives, with an impossible sea to cross and an army at their heels. And for that army behind them, it is destruction, death by drowning in the sea. The reading is from the Priestly source that lies behind large parts of the Pentateuch; and, with priestly fustiness or attention to detail and proper procedure, the writer tells the people how to mark their houses to show that they are Israelite slaves about to flee, how to prepare and eat their last meal before they flee from Egypt: eat the lamb whose blood marked their doorways; eat it roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs; do not eat it raw (sashimi) or boiled (English, pot roast). Eat it ready to run: "your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly."

An acquaintance of ours (a classical scholar) has recently published a book about rage in the ancient literature.* She shows that the *Iliad* not only tells of the rage of the Greeks for the theft of their king's wife Helen and their quest for glory in revenge but also depicts the Trojans as people with families and humor and love and honor, who also suffer devastating loss: great loss of life and the destruction of their city. Rage, the quest for honor

* Emily Katz Anhalt, *Enraged: Why Violent Times Need Ancient Greek Myths* (Yale UP). (Reviewed in *The New York Times* by Mary Beard, September 7, 2017.)

or retribution, often dehumanizes the persons who are the object of that rage. Great literature (in this case *The Iliad*) manages to see both sides. Rage is seductive and leads to the dehumanization of all parties. Great peoples recognize this threat and strive to avert it.

The Egyptians were oppressors. The justified rage of the oppressed is inevitable. The anniversary of the escape is celebrated every year in the reenactment of the Passover meal. It is perfectly understandable that the Passover is celebrated as a time of triumph. Indeed, we celebrate Easter as *our* Passover. ("Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.") But we should also recall that the reason the Passover is remembered is that it was a rescue in the face of calamity and that the Egyptians *actually* experienced calamity—deservedly perhaps, but nonetheless a great loss of life and face.

Human life in a world deep in sin is always on the brink of disaster. Tragedy is inherent in existence.

Paul believed that the end was coming: that God was about to set the calamitous world right once and for all. Indeed, he and his contemporaries puzzled that it had not happened yet. As we heard this morning, "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." He and his contemporaries in the church faced persecution; indeed, he would be put to death. But one should not give over to despair: "live honorably as in the day" not in nighttime desperation of drunkenness and debauchery, quarreling and jealousy. God's moral commandments come down to one rule, which is the fulfillment of all law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is hard. Jingoism and in-group identification come more naturally and instinctively. But we are to "owe no one anything, except to love one another." And for Paul love was not just internal to the community of the followers of Jesus but to the whole community of humanity. Think how Paul, once a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, strove to hold together the whole human family. He worked to keep the family of the people of Israel,

which includes the Jesus people—he worked to keep the people of Israel together at the same time as he became the Apostle to the Gentiles, reaching out to the larger world. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Matthew wrote in a time after Paul when the church (understandably but tragically) had become defensive and inward looking. Against the world, these Christians had something like the rage of the Greeks against the Trojans, who were also suffering. Our Gospel reading today is one of the passages that most clearly shows the church putting words into Jesus’ mouth, talking about how to relate to each other in a community that is fenced off from both Jews and Greeks/Romans and on the defensive, as people are when they are in a socially- or politically- or racially- or economically- or self-segregated community. Matthew has Jesus here advising on the settlement of disputes among members of the Jesus community: forgiving sins or meting out punishment for crimes and misdemeanors between Christians. This might be good advice for a school or a community council or a congregation, but it does not have in view humanity as a whole—indeed, the cosmos, this little earth our island home and all creatures therein.

For our tough times, let’s follow Paul, that greatest convert to Jesus’ vision. In the face of the disasters and dangers that beset us, “love one another”—and not just our little group or even the larger church or the people of our country— love one another in the largest sense, for “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Amen.