

Image bearers

Proper 24A; October 22, 2023; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99;

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

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In the words of our neighbors, the Sisters from the convent in Danville: The treasure of the scriptures is a gift to the Church. We ask God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- to help us hear the living Word we have been given today. Amen.

You probably know this, but I find it so exciting to discover how the scriptures we share together every week build on everything we have already learned about God. When we encounter the living Word in this way- of course the Word is also given to us in other powerful ways, such as through the Sacraments- we are transformed, and our ongoing transformation continues to open us to knowing and experiencing God. It is a spiral that turns us around- not back to where we've already

been, like our children's train sets that circle endlessly under the Christmas tree- but always takes us somewhere new, and as we journey onwards we learn more and more about what it means to be God's people in all the places and all the seasons of our lives.

In today's reading from Exodus- our final one after many weeks of stories from this second book of the Bible- Moses pushes God to declare that God will continue to be present with God's people. Moses knew that the only thing that made the Israelites different from any other people or nation in the world is *the God of their ancestors has promised to be their God also*, present in their midst and going before them on their journey from slavery in Egypt to liberation and eventually life in the Promised Land. These narratives of how the Israelites begin to live into being God's chosen people are all about learning what it really means for God's presence to

always be with them despite all their doubts and poor choices along the way: whether God's face can be safely seen or must remain unseen, whether God is a punishing or a forgiving God (or both!), how God calls God's self by many different names that teach the people about the relationship between God and themselves. We have heard in these stories a variety of names that all begin with I AM: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I AM WHO I AM or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE; I am the Lord your God who taught you shall have no other gods before me; *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt so that I might dwell among you.*"

In every naming, we are learning how God longs to be with God's chosen people- despite all their foolishness and disobedience and their constant need for more proof, God's desire is to be present with them and for them to

place all their trust *in living as if they believe this is true*. Moses knows that the only hope for repairing the broken covenantal relationship between God and the people rests on **who God is**- not on anything that the all too human Israelites can possibly say or do. Moses knows that Israel cannot survive without God's unfolding self-revelation- thus, the God who declared "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE" is the same God who now promises "***I Will Be Gracious to Whom I Will Be Gracious, and I Will Show Mercy on Whom I Will Show Mercy.***" Every time God names God's self, we learn more not only about who God is but how we are meant to live as well- if we are to call ourselves God's people.

In today's Gospel, when Jesus responds to the Pharisees and the Herodians who are trying to trick him with their question about if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not, our New Revised Standard Version of the

Bible says this: “Whose head is this (on the coin called a denarius) and whose title?” But the word in Greek is actually *ikon*, which is better translated as “likeness”- especially, an image or likeness of that which is holy- a spiritual image, not a physical one. It is the very same word found in the Greek translation of the book of Genesis, when in chapter 1, verse 26 we hear: ***“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”*** The use of this word brings us right back to God’s original pronouncement and promise: we were made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore we are made to be much more than we sometimes realize- ***we have been created to live in such a way that we point back to the God who created us.*** We are to live not like ‘gods’- lower case ‘g’- those who abuse their authority over others because they worship false idols of power and violence, but like the Holy One who creates and redeems and sustains. As image-bearers, we are called to serve as co-creators with God, charged with the mindful

stewardship of all creation, with extending the abundance and fullness of life to all as God desires the world to know it.

The heart of Jesus' response to those who plot against him is not to criticize them for carrying or using this coin *but to tell them they have forgotten who they are- in whose likeness they were made*. And so we too must hold ourselves and each other accountable to remembering that our primary identity is as God's beloved people, made in the image and likeness of God, created to live like the God who has said "I will always be your God" and whom we have seen revealed in the person of Jesus. This is so important, beloveds, because as you know all too well the world will try and tell us differently. Figuring out how to live into the likeness of God calls us to make decisions daily about what that looks like for each of us, clinging as

we do to all the promises of God that have always and will always be ours.

Earlier this week a very dear friend, someone incredibly faithful and with a true servant heart, was lamenting the heartbreak and tragedy of a world where bomb shelters are in backyards and recess for children is in an underground playground. “If Jesus himself couldn’t stop the madness, then what will it take for us to stop it now?” she wondered. If we’re honest with ourselves, I think we all wonder that at times- and now is surely one of them, with the world’s gaze focused on the Holy Land and the tremendous need for peace and healing there as we grieve the loss of so many innocent lives. It is true- the actions of others who abuse power and choose violence towards other human beings and toward God’s creation can discourage us as we wonder how we can possibly make a difference in the face of such evil. And yet, as I

answered my friend, there is something we **can** do: we can remain faithful to our call to be God's people in the world, remain steadfast to the work we have been given to do because we have been made in the likeness of God.

We **can** help shift the world towards healing and wholeness because we are the ones called to make God's grace, God's mercy, God's love come alive in this place and in our time. As we hear from the apostle Paul in today's epistle, writing as he was to a faith community also desperately in need of encouragement and support:

“For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you...and you became imitators of the Lord, so that you became an example. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you and in every place your faith in God has become known. You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and a true God.”

On Thursday at our vestry meeting I handed out these tiny candles, and we turned off the lights and held a few moments of silence as they flickered bravely against the darkness of the world outside our doors. We remembered that because we have been made in the image of God we are called to bring light into the dark places of our world, even-especially!- when it feels overwhelming, fully believing that every tiny flicker pushes back the darkness, every action of grace and mercy and love helps to shift the world away from evil and injustice and towards healing and wholeness. I invite you to take one home with you so that it can be a tangible reminder that light shines in the darkness *and the darkness cannot, will not overcome it*. We have everything we need to be faithful to this moment-it is our work to proclaim this. *Amen*.

