

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, February 6, 2011.

(Isaiah 58:1-9a; I Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20)

"Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in Jesus Christ our Savior." Set us free from the bondage of sins, ooh, I feel like maybe we're supposed to start getting ready for Lent. Maybe a little hint of Lent is coming. It may be time to start thinking about our bad selves and the things we need to give up -- chocolate. That will surely make us better people. Giving up that glass of wine at dinner, surely making us holier people. Yes, Lent, a time for lots of self reflection and self-flagellation, all about us.

Free, bondage, liberty. I have to say, watching the news as it came out of Egypt this week made me think I need to think a little less about my little trivial sins and a little more about the kind of bondage and systematic systems that oppress and hold others in political and economic and spiritual bondage. Listening to the cries for freedom and for dignity coming from the Egyptian people just asking that they might enjoy the same privileges of living in a democracy that we take for granted every day. Well, that has made me read today's lessons with a more careful ear.

In the Old Testament, God is not just impatient with his holy people, God is angry. God is angry with how "they" -- never "us" -- go through the motions of worship, go through the customary ritual, say, of fasting or ashes on the forehead, but their day-to-day lives embody disregard for what the Lord truly desires. "Will you call that a fast? I'll tell you what a fast is. The fast I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly." I wonder how those words sounded to Coptic Christians this morning as they celebrated the mass in Egypt. The Old Testament sounds a very strong theme for light shining in the darkness, and this theme is taken up in Jesus when he says, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give the glory to your Father in heaven." I have to wonder this morning what our light has to do with the light in Egypt and the cries for justice that we are hearing from another part of the world.

I've spent a great deal of time listening to various voices coming out of Egypt, voices of Muslims, voices of Christians, voices of men and even from Tahrir Square, Liberty Square, voices of women who normally do not even move outside of their homes -- maybe not even outside of their neighborhoods -- to speak in public. All these voices united in a cry to be freed from the bondage of a dictatorship, free to enjoy liberty and justice and human rights. Voices from all different walks of life. I heard these voices on NPR, on CNN and various eyewitness accounts from *The New York Times*. I watched and I read about the sharp contrast between the pro-democracy protesters and those provocatively violent counter-protesters that seemed to have amazing coordination as they rolled out of buses with similar signs and wielded bats filled with

nails. If you have watched the news closely and from various sources, you will see the stark contrast between the supporters of democracy from a wide swath of Egyptian life and the defenders of Mubarak and his regime.

But I'm also reminded of other Biblical voices who found life and death and life in Egypt, freedom and bondage in Egypt. Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt for a period to find a better life. Joseph and his brothers escaped famine by going to Egypt and finding a better life. The Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. According to tradition, St. Mark the evangelist brought the Gospel to Egypt where the church blossomed and brought us some of the most brilliant theological minds that we have ever known and the wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers and the Coptic Church remains today.

The Egyptian people are standing at a crossroads, at a threshold, at a moment of transformation. As Nicholas Kristof puts it in his column this morning in *The New York Times*, I quote, "In 1979, a grassroots uprising in Iran led to an undemocratic regime that oppresses women and minority and destabilizes the region. In 1989, uprisings in Eastern Europe led to the rise of stable democracies. So if the Egyptian protesters overcome the government, will this be 1979 or 1989?" No one can predict the future with certainty, but I think there are some scenes coming to us from Egypt that are particularly compelling. Scenes of Christians, who even though their church was bombed a few weeks ago, Christians in Tahrir Square protecting Muslims as they pray, Muslims protecting Christians as they pray, men allowing women to speak out for human rights. There are scenes coming from there where people are standing shoulder to shoulder peacefully because they have seen a vision, a vision of hope and justice, a vision of barriers that have been brought up being pulled down, a vision that crosses lines of division. The way is uncertain, but the vision is clear.

When Jesus of Nazareth climbed the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee in a rather natural amphitheater, he looked out upon thousands. He looked out over mostly Jews, but also Gentiles, Samaritans, Sirophenicians, groups of people who weren't sure they could live together in peace, but were hungry for a vision of going forward. He looked out over a mass of people living under the occupation of a foreign army. He looked out over a people ruled by a king who was a puppet of that faraway empire. In the Sermon on the Mount from which we heard the Gospel today, Jesus tells his disciples, but also all the thousands of others listening in, that there is a way forward though the path may be uncertain, that there is a vision of hope and peace though the way may be dangerous, there is a future that can be now and it is called the Kingdom of heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount that begins with beatitudes and continues today captures this description of the Kingdom of heaven, a kingdom where the poor are blessed, the grieving are comforted and where followers of God try to learn what it means to embody love and compassion. The Kingdom of God is that place where we not only receive God's love and mercy and blessing, but we become signs and agents of God's love and mercy and justice and compassion. In other words, those who would follow Jesus must not hunker down in the comfort of the familiar and in the comfort of the like-minded. Those who would follow Jesus can never be about business as usual where business just ignores the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the sick or those persecuted far away. Those who would follow Jesus cannot follow our own desires for self gratification and self glorification. Those who would follow Jesus must seek the

Kingdom of God and its righteousness and its justice first, and then we will find abundant life. When Jesus preached this on the mountaintop beside the Sea of Galilee, it was revolutionary and the people did not know what he was talking about. It is still revolutionary, and we still struggle to understand what Jesus is talking about.

In addition to watching lots of the regular news sources, I do have a few unconventional news sources, I must confess to you, late night on Comedy Central. A certain source of news that's questionable and yet quite interesting -- from a certain Stephen Colbert I heard reports, which I find easy to believe, of a group of Christians in Texas, my home state, who gathered at the footsteps of the state capitol in Austin to pray -- as is their right -- to pray that the speaker of the house in the state legislature would not be re-elected to his post, that the Republican Jewish speaker of the Texas state house not be re-elected because he was Jewish and could not fulfill the Christian principles that had elected the rest of the statewide Republican slate. That is their understanding of the Kingdom of heaven. In the same report, a pastor spoke of how he would tell his Christian congregation that they could never vote for an elected official who is Muslim. That is his vision of the Kingdom of heaven.

St. Luke's is a quiet place. We don't really like to be all that showy or prophetic or screaming on any street corner and I have not yet, although it could happen, asked you to go down and pray at the steps of the state capitol. But I would say this, that in our country and among many of our fellow Christians there are disturbing visions of the Kingdom of heaven, visions that are more defined by who they exclude than who they include, visions built upon fear, visions built upon hate. Americans have the right, the hard-earned right to express such views, but we as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven must not sit down or stand still or be silent when such voices try to drown out the voices of freedom and liberty for all.

St. Luke's must be, in our own quiet way, salt that brings out a flavor of Christianity in a multi-culture of conflicting personalities and viewpoints. St. Luke's must be a light that does not hide but a parish that shares not the good works we do, but the good works that God has done in our lives that blesses us in ways that we could share those blessings with others. St. Luke's must be the kind of embassy of the Kingdom of God that not just welcomes all, but reaches out to all. May we be a church that says to that small Christian community in Egypt, "We are with you, brothers and sisters, as you learn, as you find a way forward in peace to find justice for all. We are with you, brothers and sisters and Christians all over the world. Even where you are found persecuted, we will be with you striving for a vision of peace that will not just be another vision of violent exclusion."

The Kingdom of heaven is something worth fighting for. The Kingdom of heaven is never something worth killing for, but the Kingdom of heaven has been something worth dying for and those who have died live again in the resurrection and we live in their light and we hold up that light. All are welcome in our church and we must go to all who hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake. Amen.