

Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 17, 2020 - Saint David's, Halifax NS

Readings: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Call to Worship:

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise.

**Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard. [Ps. 66:1-2,8]**

Prayer:

**Great and loving God,
your will for us in Jesus is the peace the world cannot give;
your abiding gift is the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promised.
We praise you with thankful hearts.
Help us to love you and to keep your word
so that we may live in resurrection hope;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God forever. Amen.**

Psalm 66:8-12, 16-20 (NRSV)

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,

⁹ who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.

¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.

¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;

¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.

¹⁷ I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue.

¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹ But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

²⁰ Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

I Peter 3:13-16a

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your

defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

Reflection:

CBC Radio's The Current has launched a creative writing experiment for listeners. Writer and poet Michael Lista wrote the start of a very short story and listeners have been invited to complete it in a minute or less. Every day one of the stories is read on the show. Michael Lista begins by reading his portion, identical words every day. Then a different voice completes the story which day by day goes in a myriad of directions. Same beginning, many endings.

Isn't that what happens with God's story? The creative word of life and love spoken since the beginning and made flesh in Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen comes to the ears and hearts of countless generations, and each is invited to continue the story in one's own words: "Come and hear. . . and I will tell what God has done for me." God's story launches us on our own story, which we are invited, compelled even, to tell to others--if not in so many words, then surely in our actions and attitudes.

We ask ourselves as followers of Jesus, the important questions: "Who are we?" and "What is God calling us to do?" Helpful--perhaps even essential--to finding the answers to those questions is the sorting out of what God means to us, what Jesus means to us, what church means to us. How do we continue God's story in the story of our own lives?

The Psalmist is eager to tell anyone who will listen of the awesome things that God has done. He starts off with the story of the escape from slavery in Egypt on dry land through the Red Sea. He praises God's goodness to Israel.

Then he goes on to say, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for *me*." God is active not only in Israel's history but in daily life. "God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me."

Personal, passionate, praise-filled testimony that the Psalmist wants the whole world to hear. "Come. . . and I will tell what God has done." God's story of liberation shapes the Psalmist's own life story and it wants proclamation.

Personal testimony is not a usual part of Presbyterian worship. Our tradition has tended to shy away from talking too openly or emotionally about our faith except perhaps in study groups. Like politics, religion was often seen as too sensitive a topic, and too personal, to bring up with our friends and neighbours.

But we live in what some observers call a "very spiritual age." People are yearning for meaning. Might we learn to offer our story born of God's story?

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that it is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence," writes the author of I Peter. Know what you think and what you believe. Trust the Spirit to help you put it into words. Do not be afraid, but when you are given the opportunity to witness to your hope in Christ, do it with gentleness and respect for others. It's meant to be

a conversation, not a tirade. Know that God's story may take a different direction in someone else's life.

During this time of pandemic and isolation, we seek ways of communicating with one another. We know more than ever how important community is. One of the ways we support one another is through listening to each other's stories. We need to hear those stories of courage, ingenuity, suffering, grief and hope. Every radio interview seems to begin or end with "How are you doing through this?" and all kinds of media introduce us to the stories of ordinary people in extraordinary situations. It's the human touch we require.

But beyond the daily narrative of struggle and sacrifice, service and creativity, maybe this is an opportunity to reflect more deeply on how God's story shapes our own and how in turn our story may offer hope to others. Might we consider for our own clarity and edification what gives us hope, why we are attracted to God and to Jesus, what church community means to us? Might we invite our children and young people to tell what God has done for them? Might we also be willing to tell them what God has done for us?

In our reflections and in our storytelling through word and action, Jesus assures us that we are not alone. The Spirit of truth remains with us and in us to enable us to know God's presence and to carry on Christ's work. The Spirit sustains the hope within us, the hope born of Easter, that Christ is risen, that the Crucified and Risen Christ is sovereign over this world, even now, that life not death has won. It is this hope that shines through us to others so that they ask, "What does this mean?" By the Spirit at work in us we are able to say. And in explaining this hope, we point them to the One in whom they, and we, can find life in all its fullness, the Lord of heaven and earth, the God in whom "we live and move and have our being."

Amen. Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Generous God, we bless you for your gift of life renewed through Christ's love. Bless us and the offerings we make to the work of your church so that our lives may reflect the hope and renewal we have found in Christ, throughout our community and in the world you love, in Jesus' name.

Loving God, we thank you for all that you have done for humanity—for your care and patience, your guidance and forgiveness, your gift of life in Jesus Christ.

Gracious God, we thank you for all the people in our lives who told their faith stories to us in simple word or loving action: for parents and grandparents who taught us of you and your ways, for Sunday School teachers and preachers who helped us understand your word, for sisters and brothers in Christ whose companionship has helped us to love the church, for writers and artists and musicians who open to us the wonders of your world and the mystery of your grace. We pray for all such teachers and leaders and guides that they and that we may share the good news of your love with gentleness and reverence and humility so that all people may know your abundant life.

God of peace, we pray for the nations of the world and for all peoples suffering from deprivation, conflict, and the threat of covid-19. We ask that your Spirit of reconciliation will work in and through people everywhere, bringing health and hope to all.

God of strength and comfort, be with those who especially need you in these days: health care workers and all front line workers, those who are sick or anxious, those who have lost loved ones, those who are lonely, those who are afraid. We name those whom we know in the silence now. . . .

In thanksgiving for all who have gone before us in the faith and in union with them through Christ, we offer our lives to you, O God.

Holy God, Creator, Saviour and Helper, now lead on. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.
Amen.*