

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson
November 8, 2020
Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior
“Good News for Our Time”

There's a tribe gathered on the river bank. They have been in a wilderness and are more than ready to enter a new land, a new time. They are ready to leave what is behind and live into something different. Their leader stands before them and reminds them of who they are as a people. Now, it is time for them to make a choice, a choice on which their very life depends. The leader frames the choice: either choose God who made you a people and has sustained you in the wilderness or choose the god of a foreign nation.

Those few words are a retelling of the Joshua passage from our first reading. In that story, the leader is Joshua and the tribe is the Hebrew people. But, on this Sunday after our national election, those same words could also be a retelling of where we are as Americans. Perhaps for months, and certainly in the last many days, we have been at the edge, posed to cross over into an America shaped by the results of a presidential and states election on November 3rd. We have been that at the edge listening to leaders tell our story as a people. We stand believing the choice in front of us is a choice of life or death. In these ways, the ancient Hebrew story is like our current one.

Yet, the Hebrew story has several significant difference from ours. In our national story, there is not 1 but 2 tribes. There is not one leader recalling our national story, but 2 tribal stories being told with different visions. While both leaders are calling for a life-or-death choice, their visions of life are quite different. Each tribe believes their own leader. Each tribe fears that the choice of the other leader and tribe will mean death for them. And the divide between them is not body of water.

Instead a seeming chasm of distrust at best and hatred at worst separates us. Both tribes see the divide and neither tribe knows how to deal with this looming gap between them, even if there is the desire to do so. Yet, ironically, the members of both tribes are standing on the same ground. The dry dust of fear is stirred up by their restless feet and fills their lungs with each breath. Distrust springs up like weeds around them. Rumors or truths of plotted violence flow around them as if they were standing in water.

It is easy to identify our nation with the story of the Hebrew people about to cross the Jordan River. Except, the Joshua story is not about politics. Joshua is not making a political speech. Joshua is not running for office. Joshua is asking God's people to make a choice about their religious and spiritual life - who will be their God, their source of Life. Of course, politics will come into play, but Joshua, as the leader, is concerned about their core choice, their life stance, the Source of Life at their center - as a community, as households and as individuals. Joshua stands in their midst, in the swirl of their fear at what's ahead, and asks the people to remember who makes them a people, sustains them in any wilderness, and calls them to a covenant for the common good.

So, we gather on this Sunday, some of us in one political tribe and some of us in another political tribe. And after our political leaders have been clamoring for our attention and vote, we are here as 21st century followers of Jesus because there's another voice we need to hear. I believe each of us is here today because we need Jesus' presence and voice in our midst.

In this time of fear and distrust, we need to hear the gospel, the good news of Jesus. When covid, racial unrest, economic insecurity are making us feel small, isolated and wanting to circle our wagons. So, what does Jesus say to a group of disciples like us? We aren't be the first followers of Jesus to be afraid and hurting because of civil circumstances. We aren't be the first Christians to struggle to find a way to live as good neighbors when those around us present challenges to our faith and morals. No, we aren't. Each of us can think of other times in human history when Christians wrestled with how to square what they profess in their creed with what was happening in the political world around them. None of them had a clear map. All of them had obstacles to navigate and voices to filter through. No time or place in Christian history has been spared the challenges of their own time. It has been ever so.

It has been ever so - in fact, all the way back to the evening of Jesus' resurrection. Remember. Some disciples have heard Mary Madelene and others tell of seeing the risen Lord. But no Easter trumpets sound for those disciples gathered in the upper room. They are afraid. The doors of the house are locked. They don't trust the world out there. Jesus' death came because of a struggle between conflicting powerful leaders and visions. There are good reasons for their fear.

And, into that fearful, huddling group of disciples, the risen Jesus appears — a new creation. He speaks forth a new creation: "Peace be with you". Showing him his wounds, he speaks again: "Peace be with you." Then, Jesus breaths on their fear and distrust and, like God's Holy Breath in the beginning, transforms dust into life. The breath of Jesus, risen from the ultimate divide of death, turns the dust of fear into the spirit of peace. He plants the creation of forgiveness and love with seeds able to spread throughout the world and for all eternity.

Jesus opens locked doors, doors in communities and doors in hearts. On this "first day of the week". Jesus offers his followers a new life, to be a new creation. Yet, not like the physical creation full of sun and moon, water and land. plants and animals. This time Jesus' breath brings forth in them a life of peace and forgiveness. Jesus unlocks their fearful hearts, offering them instead a life grounded in grace and love. With that baptism of breath, Jesus transforms his disciples and sends them back into what they perceive as a hostile world. They are to be that same gift of peace and forgiveness for others.

Just as the Joshua story is like ours this day, so is this story of Jesus with those first disciples our story this day. Jesus is among us and unlocks our fearful hearts. Through our baptism, we become his Body. Like him, we carry our wounds and, yet, like him, God makes us whole. With each breath we take, we are filled with God's life of peace and forgiveness. We are citizens and followers of Jesus as we stand on the edge. Amen.