

Sermon for 6 November 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost/All Saints Sunday

Scriptures: Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalter: (*Insert: Alternate and people*) Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2”1-5. 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

“Alive”

Friday’s *Baltimore Sunpaper* carried a front-page article that is particularly suited for this week and week-end when All Saints Day and Sunday have been celebrated this year. The focus was a Baltimore movement that’s now five years old, called “Ceasefire,” dedicated to reducing the violence in Baltimore. The theme was that it’s time now to shift focus from violence to the peacemaking, the love, the positive aspects of life in Baltimore. Erricka Bridgeford, a cofounder of Baltimore’ Ceasefire movement and executive director of Baltimore’s Mediation Center, says, “As the murder lady of Baltimore I have done families a disservice because I have given murder too much credit. Doing peace work is a big part of how I grieve. It’s bringing joy, love, and compassion. That feels like a better way to grieve.” The article goes on, “it’s hard to count the lives the movement saves. She has innumerable stories of how people have come to her, often grieving and wanting to get even, but have found strength and comfort through Ceasefire events.”

I bring this up in church, this Sunday, because I think it relates so directly, so practically, with what we want to say and hear about life and death, today. The Jewish text from Haggai insists that all the destruction of the temple and the exile to Babylonia the people of Israel had experienced have not separated them from God. “My spirit abides among you; do not fear... The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts, and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.” We know by heart the words and tune the great composer Handel quoted from this passage.

The psalm for today rings the same theme, speaking directly to the worshiping Israelites in their chant and, most likely, their priest-led song, “ My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name.” The implication is that, when they’d lost everything, they still sang such psalms, just as we know the Jews in the Holocaust chanted psalms while they waited for death in the gulags.

The letter to the early church steps aside to put down a local teaching that Jesus has already returned, with all the questions and complications and arguments that idea threatened some parts of the young body of believers. Paul’s fondness for this congregation comes through keenly, and he reminds them he didn’t teach that to them ... and closes with a tender word of prayer that God, and Jesus, together will “comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.” Christians are to work, leaving the times and endings to God, as always before and until the power beyond all human power closes the age.

Finally, we have, only in Luke, the tale so like what we are all mighty familiar with in our current political climate. Jesus is confronted by a very conservative branch of Hebrew theologians, the Sadducees, who only use the first five books of the Bible, with a mocking example that has no

sign of anything but challenge about it, no interest except in heckling this upstart teacher. It's pretty clear that Jesus leaned towards the teachings of the Pharisees, who were much more progressive, and who had an oral tradition of the Hebraic outlook that went far beyond such literalism, and that the Sadducees had observed that. In his reply, he opens our vision towards what the church itself has proclaimed from his own completion of earthly life as we know it. Jesus is alive. We live in and through God's Spirit, and Jesus is bound up with us in ways beyond our present perception, just as those whose names we read today do. We are all one in this believing fellowship, and the life we live we live by faith in his living presence among us. A hundred ways of testifying to this do not remove the grief and dismay and loneliness that physical death bring to each of us. We, like our forebears, grapple with this as do all human beings, and share with all nature the common return to dust that both dissolves and reproduces fresh life in the ways we perceive, all through reality. This is not the end. This is a subject of wonder and, through the love of God and one another, of acceptance. It is to be acknowledged, and on such days as this, to be blessed, an ongoing sign of revelation and promise.

We are alive. In death, we live with God. The work continues. We are not alone. We are neither powerless nor without tasks to do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.