

Proper 13, Year A

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalms 145: 8-9, 15-22

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

Last Sunday,
we heard Paul make
one of the boldest promises
in all of Scripture:

*Nothing can separate us
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Not hardship.
Not distress.
Not persecution.
Not death.
Not life.
Not anything else in all creation.

*Nothing can separate us
from the love of God.*

But then today,
almost before he has finished saying that,
he begins to speak about
a different kind of separation
that is breaking his heart.

“I have great sorrow,” he says,
“and unceasing anguish
in my heart.”

What Paul is grieving
is the growing distance
he was seeing at the time
between those Jewish people
who believed Jesus is the Messiah
and those who did not.

This was not just some
abstract theological problem
for Paul.

These were his people.

This was his family.

This was the story
that made him
who he is.

And so while he finds himself at odds
with his Jewish brothers and sisters,
notice that he does not speak about them
with condescension
or condemnation.

He doesn't dismiss them
or cast them off.

And he certainly doesn't say
that God is finished with them
or has moved on to somebody better.

He says:

“They are Israelites,
and to them belong
the adoption,
the glory,
the covenants,
the giving of the law,
the worship,
and the promises.”

To them *belong*.
Present tense.

Not:
these things used to be theirs,
until God took them away
and gave them to us.

Instead:
to them belong
the covenants,
the worship,
and the promises.

And from them, Paul says,
comes the Messiah himself.

* * *

I think we Christians
far too readily and far too frequently
forget just how thoroughly Jewish
our faith really is.

Jesus was Jewish.
Mary was Jewish.
The apostles were Jewish.

The prayers Jesus prayed,
the Scriptures Jesus read,
the festivals Jesus observed,
the hopes Jesus proclaimed . . .
all of them arose from the life of Israel.

That means story of Jesus
does not actually begin in Bethlehem.
It begins loooooooooong before that.

With a promise made to Abraham,
with a people delivered from slavery,
with covenants and commandments,
with kings and prophets,
with exile and homecoming,
with generations of people
wrestling with God
and discovering again and again
that God had not abandoned them.

Christianity is not a new story
that replaced all of that.

By grace,
we have been grafted *into* that story.

That is why we continue to read
the Hebrew Scriptures
every single Sunday.

We read them
because they are part
of the living story of God . . .
a story we did not begin,
a story we did not earn,
a story we do not own.

Just a few moments ago,
we sang the old Hasidic melody:

“Open your ears, O faithful people,
open your ears, and hear God’s word.”

We sang of Torah and priesthood,
of Israel and Judah,
of wisdom and word.

We sang those words
because the Gospel we proclaim
comes to us from within
the everlasting covenant
God made with Israel . . .

a covenant so abundant
that nations Israel did not know
would one day come running
because of the Holy One of Israel,
the One whom we have come to call Jesus.

We have received our faith
from others who came before us,
and the proper response
to such an inheritance
is not superiority.

It is gratitude.

* * *

That posture of gratitude
applies not only to Christianity’s relationship
with Judaism.

It applies to *everything* about our faith.

None of us began this story.

Someone carried it to us.
Someone taught us the prayers.
Someone told us about Jesus.
Someone brought us to the waters of baptism.
Someone made a place for us at the table.

Even if you came to faith much later in life,
you arrived inside a story
that other people had already been carrying
for generations.

The same is true of this very church.

St. John's has been worshiping
in the heart of this city
for nearly two hundred years.

None of us created it.
We *inherited* it.

We inherited the buildings and the windows,
the music and the prayers,
the ministries and the traditions,
the stories and the scars,
the wisdom and the mistakes.

Other people carried this church
before we ever arrived.

They *prayed* here.
They *gave* here.
They *argued* here.
They *grieved* here.
They walked these floorboards
and were *baptized* here,
took *communion* here,
got *married* here,
and *buried* the people they *loved* here.

They changed things somebody else thought
should never be changed.

They held fast to things they probably shouldn't have.

And then,
whether they knew it or not,
they entrusted it all
to us.

That, y'all, is what it means
to have deep roots.

You long-timers did not create it.
You newcomers did not discover it.

The clergy do not own it,
nor do the vestry,
nor do the staff.

The Church belongs to God.

All of us have been given a place
inside a story larger than ourselves,
and we carry it humbly toward a future
that is not ours alone to determine.

* * *

So, my friends,
as we continue to think on
what it means to “be church together,”
the grace for us today
is pretty simple.

The grace for us today
is that we did not begin this story,
and—thanks be to God—
we are not its final chapter.

We are recipients of a treasure:
of the Scriptures and sacraments,
the covenants and promises,
the buildings and ministries,
the memory and hope
of generations long before us.

Not so that we can preserve them untouched
like a dusty memorial society.
Not so that we can declare them ours alone.

But so that,
rooted in a story
older and larger than ourselves,
we can tend it faithfully for a while . . .

and become, even now,
a place of deep roots,
true belonging,
and abundant grace
for generations still to come.

And through it all,
the God who carried this story *to* us
is already carrying it *beyond* us . . .

taking what little
has been entrusted to our hands,
blessing it,

and making it enough to feed other people
we will never even know.

What a gift, y'all.
What a treasure.

Never ours to possess . . .

but ours to receive,
ours to tend,
and ours to give away.

Amen.