

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

January 22, 2017; the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23.

Marching in the Light of God

On this 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, on this Sunday after the inauguration of our 45th president, on this Sunday after the Women's March on Washington and the sister marches around our country and around the world, we are we thinking?

What are we hoping?

What are we thinking about politics and faith...Where do politics and faith intersect for us?

You have heard me preach about politics and faith before, if you have been here awhile, but for those who are new to Holy Comforter, I will say once again that Jesus was political.

Jesus was political in the sense that his message and his life called into question the ways of the world that failed to respect the dignity of every person.

God cares about our lives here on the ground, how we treat each other; how we are treated; how our government functions for us and our world. Spirituality is not reserved or restricted to this place and time on a Sunday morning...rather, we gather here, with each other and with God to ask the hard questions, to seek answers, and to come together, regardless of our politics, to support each other and receive God's blessing for this day and and this week.

This is a church and a community with a long history of standing with the marginalized and acting for justice for all. For many of us here, the campaign, the election, and now the presidency of Donald Trump has been and is troubling.

So what are we thinking today? What are we hoping today?

Where do we see Jesus, God, the Spirit in all that is happening?

How does our faith, our religion, and the world connect?

Making that connection is essential to discern God's call to us on this day and in the days ahead.

Today I'm thinking of that saying---May you live in interesting times...a blessing and a curse.

Our times are interesting. I'm thinking of the Chinese character that means both crisis and opportunity.

I'm think of Jesus marching all over the place proclaiming
that the Kingdom had come near while the people
were still subject to oppressive Roman rule.

John the Baptist had been arrested---Jesus learns of this and moves to Galilee... to an area with more Gentiles...to an area ruled by Herod Antipas who had arrested John...Jesus is thus moving into a politically dangerous place for him...seeming to fill the void left by John the Baptist.¹

For the Gospel writer, Matthew, Jesus' move to an area with Gentiles shows-- or Matthew was trying to show---Jesus is going to be for all people, not just a small group. Christianity is a world-wide peace and justice movement. Jesus came so that all people can walk in the way of God and recognize the reign of God...and in recognizing it, we long to be part of it...we long to follow Jesus.

A person who is a member of this church, posted publicly on Facebook yesterday, that for the first time, she could see God in the election. In viewing the Women's March on Washington, for the first time, she could see God in what is happening...and I know she is not alone.

It is really hard to see God, when times are difficult, when forces of darkness seem to be winning...this has always been the case...again and again in the Bible, we read of God's people struggling to maintain as sense of God when oppressed...

Isaiah...we heard today the prophet urging the people to hold on during a time of Assyrian occupation during the 8th century BCE.

Isaiah is speaking of political realities, and promising that God cares and will deliver them...they who have walked in darkness...on them light will shine...and they will see a great light.

Matthew, in his Gospel quotes from Isaiah because for him, and those who knew Jesus, whose words have been recorded in the Bible...they saw the One who would deliver them from their darkness. When they looked at Jesus, they saw hope in action...they saw love...they saw healing. For many who took part in the Women's March and those

¹ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, and Kendall McCabe, *Preaching The Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992, p. 128.

who followed it on TV and online...we saw God...we saw God in the peaceful demonstration of people who were speaking and marching for human rights for all.

So much hope given, because so many knew...knew that standing up for those who are feeling vulnerable and scared is the thing to do.

They knew they needed to march with others because they needed to feel that support. These women and men and children who marched and we who support them, support what is good and just for all. True, many were protesting against our new administration, but it was more than that...they came together to be about what is right...they just knew. They became, you became, the answer, the goodness, the power, they, you, were seeking.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is just beginning his march, which would take him to many places and people. As he started he said, "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Make a change. Turn around. Go a different way for the Reign of God is breaking in.

And when Jesus came to those fishermen, and said follow me, immediately they left their lives and followed. I like the way commentator Rodger Nishioka describes this experience of being called to follow Jesus: "It is as if they were compelled to follow Jesus and to obey him, almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be issued this call, so that when it came, they dropped what they were doing...."

Perhaps they were simply responding to what had already been imprinted on their souls from birth---the knowledge of the voice of God--so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was obey."²

We have all been created in the image of God...we know love when we encounter it. Fear is powerful...but love is much more powerful. When we look up from our lives to see what is going on around us, if we look long enough, we will see God. Maybe not right away; there is a lot that is sad and wrong in the world; but there is much that is straining toward the light.

The song, "We are Marching in the Light of God," is a song from South Africa sung by those protesting against apartheid. And as one website advises: "It can still be sung as a call for freedom, in solidarity with those who are oppressed, or simply as a

² David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol., 1*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., Rodger Y. Nishioka, "Pastoral Perspective," Loc 10306 - 10317 of 16796.

commitment to living in the light, love and power of God.”³ Sometimes we sing this song here on a Sunday, but it is a song we can sing in our hearts all the time. We will sing one verse of it after the sermon. We can be aware that we are marching in the light of God when we are seeking justice and freedom for all.

And when I saw the March on Washington, I saw people marching in the light of God...the light shined forth from them. Of course those marching were of every faith and some who would claim no faith, but, for me as a Christian, in watching them, I saw the Body of Christ, especially the views from above, when tens of thousands were in the picture, I saw the Body of Christ given for the world.

There were also many wonderful words spoken throughout the day: one woman said, “they thought they could bury us but they didn’t know that we were seeds.”

Seeds of a new beginning.

Just like Jesus.

One man said: “the embodied the world they were calling for.”

That sounds a lot like Jesus.

One person spoke of “setting the table” where people with different ideas could sit down together and learn from each other. While we may feel that some could have set that table better for us, at the end of the day, we can set the table for others.

We can be the change we want to see.

We can be the answer to our prayers---God is counting on us.

And on that table we can put compassion, hope, love, healing, understanding, forgiveness, our own repentance. God has already set that Table for us and shown us the way....given it all for us, to show us the way.

Today rather than saying the Creed, we will reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant...this covenant with God helps us know what it takes to set the table...and that God will help us and march with us, always. When we can see God, we want to follow; we have the energy; we have the determination; when we see the reign of God coming near...when we see God...we want to march in the light of God, and we know that we can, with God’s help. Amen.