Pentecost +3
One Man’s Obedience
Rev. Doug Floyd

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 69:1-18, Romans 5:12-21, Matthew 10:16-33

Our lessons this week carry the weight of threat and even anguish. Jeremiah cries out to God after the priest Pashhur has him beaten and put in stocks for speaking the Word of the Lord the people. He has been warning the people of Jerusalem of a coming invader sent by God as judgment for the sins of the land. Earlier this year, I finished reading Jeremiah with my nephew Benjamin and his friend Jimmy. We had been reading a chapter at a time each week over coffee. Almost every week, the comments after reading went along these lines, “Wow that was depressing.” “It’s so bleak.” And so on. They were ready for the New Testament after weeks on end of judgment, collapse, anguish, and pain.

Today’s Psalm is most likely written from exile. Much like the grief of Jeremiah, the Psalmist cries out from the depths and feels as though he is going blind, looking for God to come and rescue him. Many an anguished person across the ages has cried out and felt the sense of abandonment while waiting for rescue. All through Scripture, we see suffering, pain and death. The Bible is well acquainted with human pain and brokenness.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus warns His disciples of the threats swirling around as they go out in His name. He describes a world where the very foundations of society have broken down. The synagogue, a place set aside for worship and meditation upon the Law will become a place where disciples are beaten. Families will turn on another: father against son, children against parents, brother against brother. Jesus encourages the disciples not to fear even though they face abuse and possibly even death because the Lord will not forsake them even in the grave.

At a time when our world has undergone such troubling season of pandemic, isolation and rioting, loneliness and anger, these texts seem to reflect the pain and grief and troubles of the moment.

Our passage from Romans offers a way of considering this moment and having hope for the days, months, and years ahead. In our reading today, Paul contrasts a world where death reigns and a world where life reigns. We still live in a world where death reigns at every level even as we cling to the hope that right in the middle of the bleakness, the grace of God is being revealed and the promise of eternal life shines forth.

Paul is writing to Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome. In the first several chapters, he argues that both are under sin and both have found freedom through the free gift of grace revealed in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Paul uses the creation story in chapter one, the Abraham story in chapter four, and the Adam story in chapter five to demonstrate the great promise that brings Jews and Gentiles together in one family. As Paul writes in chapter 1,

18 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1)
In our reading this morning Paul compares Adam and Jesus Christ to highlight death and life in our world. As I think about Adam and Jesus Christ, I try remember that this story is embodied in physical actions and a physical world. It is not simply abstract ideas about the nature of redemption.¹

Some of the Church Fathers, especially in the East, tended to view the material creation in a negative light. Some went so far as to link the fall with the moment of physical creation. In the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor tried to offer a defense of creation as good though sin stained. I am going to try and give us a picture of how Maximus viewed creation drawing especially upon Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Dmitrue Staniloae.²

In the creation story, we behold a world that is good, very good. It is a world that is pure gift from the Father, Son and Spirit. It is a world that is translucent to the light and love of God. This world reflects the pattern of receiving and giving. Even as the plants have been given life, they reproduce and give life to the animals and the humans. Adam serves the plants as he cultivates the garden, and he cares for the animals in naming them.

All creation reflects the image of God at some level, but Adam and Eve are created to bear the image and likeness of the Triune God like children who grow up to image their parents in word and deed. In their relationship with the Creator, in their communion with one another, and in their care for the planet, they will model this exchange of love. It appears that their participation in this communion of love will influence all creation.

In the words of Von Balthasar, the whole creation is a cosmic liturgy. It is shining from glory to glory. The movement of love, the receiving and giving of gifts opens all things to develop and grow and reveal more and more glory. In this sense, all of creation is imbued with a glory-filled potential from God. At the center of this creation is Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve are like a cosmos in miniature. Their communion of love echoes all through the cosmos. Then in Genesis three, the serpent convinces Eve and Adam that by submitting to the Father’s command, they are being denied something. The Heavenly Father is denying them essential knowledge and repressing the development of who they are. In the act of obeying the serpent, they are denying the Father’s rule and usurping his authority over creation.

As Paul tells us in Romans, sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men. The horror of Adam and Eve obeying the serpent is the horror of death echoing through all living things. Think of a piece of fruit that is no longer connected to the vine. It can be eaten for nourishment, but over time it will begin to rot. It will discolor, begin to smell bad, and eventually dry out.

When I was growing up, a neighbor’s cow died. He left it in the field. It began to bloat and soon the whole neighborhood was filled with a horrible odor: the aroma of death. In Romans 5, Paul is addressing the death that impacts Jew and Gentile alike. This death is the breakdown of the

cosmic liturgy. The world that was translucent to God’s love has become blind and dark. Relations between humans break down. Adam turns against Eve. Cain kills Abel. The aroma of death impacts every aspect of humanity and thereby impacts every aspect of creation. The receiving and giving of love is replaced with scarcity of resources and selfish preservation.

Animals kill one another. The human world reels in rebellion, darkness, shame, loneliness, debt, and slavery. The mind, will, and emotions are all impacted by this creeping death. Genesis 3 through 11 tells the story of disintegration, perversion, barrenness, and violence. If not for the grace of God, all things would break down.

In Romans 5, Paul explains that sin was the cause of death, but death was the sign of a world out of order, a world in corruption. From Adam to Moses, death was present even though humans didn’t understand sin. One of the Church Fathers whom we call Ambrosiaster because we don’t know his name, says that prior to the law, humans recognized some sort of natural law. Humans were avenging perceived wrongs; humans were trying to worship the creator though often in perverse ways; humans were even administering some type of social/moral codes.³

These human attempts at justice can turn into endless wars of retribution between nations, overreaction to perceived insults resulting in violence and even murder, repression or attempted genocide of a specific group in society, and even anarchy. Outside of the grace of God, humans can corrupt the good gifts of justice, order, sexuality, family, truth, and beauty into perversions that dehumanize us and destroy our capacity to live or love rightly.

We grow up in a world with patterns of death: broken relationships, church splits, oppression of races, economic disparity, and much more. As the people of God, we are called to step into the darkness with His light, and yet we ourselves can perpetuate patterns of death. Reading through church history can be discouraging as we see leaders turn against one another, curse one another, and even wish for the demise of the other. Maximus the Confessor is called the “confessor” because he stood for truth even though it was not in vogue in a time when heresy prevailed. His tongue was cut out and his hand was cut off to keep him from speaking or writing the truth. Outside of the God’s grace, our efforts for justice and truth on the right or the left can become endless wars of retribution.

There is another pattern. Just as Adam was disobedient leading to death, Jesus was obedient leading to life. The obedience of Jesus opens way to abundance of grace, the free gift of righteousness, and reigning in life. In one sense, the entire life of Jesus is the act of an obedient Son. Jesus freely obeys the Father out of love. His whole life is an expression of complete trust in the Father and obedience to the Father but the power of the Spirit. At the same time, His death on the cross is the expression of free and complete loving submission and obedience. As Philippians 2 explains,

⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the

name that is above every name, \(^\text{10}\) so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, \(^\text{11}\) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:8-11)

Adam and Eve obeyed the serpent for fear that obedience and submission would diminish who they could be. The life and death of Jesus reveals that submission to the Father and obedience to His will does not diminish or deny glory but leads to glory and fullness of life.\(^4\) In his free and loving submission, Jesus heals the breach between the world and God. As we trust in Christ, we come to rest in the absolute lovingkindness and faithfulness of God no matter what we suffer or what we see in a world of where death still reigns. We are freed from the power of sin and death. We don’t have to preserve our lives in this world.

We are free to pour out our lives to God in submission and obedience even as we are free to pour our lives toward one another. Our bodies can now become instruments of righteousness in this world, can become gifts of life to a world suffering in death. In Romans, Paul is encouraging the Jews and Gentiles to freely and completely love one another even as they ultimately rest in the unfathomable love of God. There is no need to compete over who keeps what day holy or who does or doesn’t eat certain foods. We can pour out our lives as living sacrifices to God and one another. In so doing, we enter into the great work and gift of healing our families, our communities, and our world. In a time of such great confusion and tension in the world, we need not bury our heads in the sand. But we also need not replicate rhythms of death. Instead, we ask for Christ to lead us by His Spirit into ways of speaking and serving that bring life and healing.

We live in the reality of eternal life, the mystery of knowing God in the great communion of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. As we go forth into the world, we may face rejection, suffering, and mockery of the name of Jesus, and even death, but we know our Father is faithful and in due season He will raise us up even as He raises this world from death to life as Jesus brings all enemies under His feet even death itself.