

The More Things Change

July 11, 2021

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One of the things that I have to restrain myself from preaching about TOO often is baseball. I've been a big Brewers fan since grade school, and while there are so many aspects of the game that can be metaphors for a life of faith, there's always the danger of losing the attention of the folks who don't care for sports or, even worse, getting fans of a rival team steamed up.

But, once in a while, I just can't restrain myself. One of those times is today. I'll blame it on timing: after today, baseball will take their "All-Star Break," which, for those of you who don't follow America's pastime, is several days out of inter-team play a little more than halfway through the season. And the more I think about it, my remarks here are less about baseball and more about being a fan and being a student of history...

Some of you may have leafed through your bulletins already and saw the invitation to the party at Scott's and my home following our daughter's baptism next month. What that invitation doesn't tell you is Josie's godfather is a Cubs fan (shudder). The first thing I'd like you to take away from the fact that we chose someone with such a dubious pedigree to be her mentor in the faith is that I do practice what I preach, and that I do believe God can work through everyone, even those with such glaring flaws.

Now, by virtue of being a Brewers fan for more than 40 years, I've endured a lot of heartache. My team has perpetually been the also-ran. They're the boys of summer who never quite make it. My traditional refrain when the Brewers lose their home opener is, "There's always next year."

While the Cubs were the Lovable Losers, even they won a World Series. So, late last month when the Brewers were on fire, I took a screenshot of the National League standings and sent it to Josie's godfather. It just so happens that it showed the Brewers five games up from the Cubs. Showing uncommon restraint, he didn't write back.

So, the next day I sent him a screenshot showing the Brewers six games up from the Cubs. His response was, "I seem to remember that you studied someone who said, 'Pride goeth before the fall.'" The next day, when I sent him a screenshot showing the Brewers seven games up from the Cubs, the text I received back was, "I'm sorry but the customer you are trying to reach is no longer listening."

Here's the thing: I'm celebrating the Brewers doing well now because I have every expectation that they're going to tank. Somehow, in the next 72 games, they'll find a way to fall apart. Oh, they'll keep my attention, will do just enough to keep me watching through September, but I'm under no illusion that sitting comfortably on top of their division right now automatically translates into October baseball.

The Scriptures

So, what does this have to do with our scripture readings today? Quite frankly, one of the things that I want you to take away from both our passage from the Book of the Prophet Amos and our Psalm is that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Let's first talk through the passage from Amos. First, he's a prophet. Now, remember what a prophet is: someone called by God to call God's people back into right relationship. God calls prophets to bring attention to the ways that society has gotten off track, to call attention to the ways that as a society we're not living lives of justice and compassion. In particular, the Book of the Prophet Amos is a critique of the growing disparity between the very rich and the very poor.

In the broadest of brushstrokes, in our passage from chapter 7 today, Amos tells God's people that if they keep on allowing the poor to get poorer while the rich get richer, the things that their ancestors were most proud of will be laid to waste, their most cherished institutions will be devastated, and the stability of their government will be rocked. We, of course, aren't living under a king, but part of what makes this the LIVING Word of God is that it still applies so well today. The more we allow inequality to grow, the more we build our society on the backs of the poor, the more we look out only for ME without taking into account the WE, the more likely that the same fate that befell our ancestors in the faith will happen to us. When we live by the rules of profits being more important than people, when we worship at the altar of individual rights without also paying homage to collective responsibility, when politicians are spending their time working to curb voting and limit the teaching of truth, the scriptures tell us that God's reckoning is inevitable. A society built on the instability of injustice is going to crumble. The only question is when, and who will be hurt the most.

But before we dissolve into depressed puddles, paralysed by the seeming inevitability of the downfall of society, let's listen to our Psalm again. Psalm 85 tells us that God's salvation is at hand. Not all is lost. Utter devastation is not inevitable.

Friends, I wrote to you last month that George Harrison's line, "It's been a long, cold, lonely winter" has been a refrain for me in the past 18 months. It's been a long, cold, lonely winter. We've all struggled. Just as our ancestors in the faith were tested, just as Jesus was tested by those who were scared of the radical love he was teaching and the ways THAT would threaten their comfortable lives, so, too, we've all been tested.

Where George Harrison's assessment of current reality is followed by "here comes the sun," and "it's alright," the Psalmist tells us that though we've been tested, though we may be in a difficult place, God's salvation is at hand, that "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky." In other words, God's goodness, God's love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace are going to be so real in your lives, you're going to feel as if you can touch them. They're going to be as present to you as someone you can kiss, as prevalent as flowers and weeds.

When you leave here today, I want you to try to observe every flower. Every single one. Try to see every flower, and then remind yourself that our Psalm today tells us that God's

faithfulness is that present and available to us. And lest we listen to this Psalm amidst a drought, we're told that God's righteousness will envelop us like the sky.

Conclusion

Friends, I started my reflections telling you about a silly volley of texts between a good friend and me and reflected on the ubiquity of my beloved baseball team never quite making it all the way. So often, we say the more things change, the more they stay the same. I'm a Brewers fan, but decades of ending shy of the winner's circle have left me cautious, even if they're five games up heading into the All-Star break. I'm a Christian, but centuries of people claiming in one breath to follow Jesus and in the next following their egos and pocketbooks have left me fearing for our world.

But the Psalmist and George Harrison and the Cubs give me hope. While we're all too aware that several thousand years after the Book of the Prophet Amos was written, humans still struggle to treat one another with justice and mercy. I have hope because though it's been a long, cold, lonely winter, here comes the sun. Because God's faithfulness to us is as present to us as the Creeping Charlie in my yard, God's love as close to us as the air we breathe. And, because if the Cubs can win it all, maybe my Brewers can, too.

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13
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