

“To live threatened with resurrection!”

25 Nov 2018

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Theme: Eternity Sunday, Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday

Scripture: Luke 17: 20-21, John 18:33-37, Revelation 1:4-8

Good morning ... I am glad to be here, in my own congregation for Eternity Sunday, which is also the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday we will begin a new church year, we will begin all over again with Advent, waiting for God to be born into our world. But today, today is the culmination of this church year, sometimes called the Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday. And we pair it with Eternity Sunday, when we remember our dear ones who have died, when we remember our deep losses, and we acknowledge our grief and lament. I think that Eternity Sunday and the Reign of Christ Sunday is a beautiful pairing. In the face of profound loss, in the face of overwhelming pain, we look to Jesus and to the kingdom that he let loose. We bring our grief, our sorrow to Jesus who knows all about agony and abandonment in this life. And we do this not just as individuals, but we also do this as a community. We carry our collective pain to the Christ who was there at the creation of the world, who is among us today, and who will be with us in all our next days.

[Interestingly, Reign of Christ Sunday, this last Sunday of the church calendar, was instituted very late in the development of church liturgy. In 1925, Pope Pius XI, instituted the liturgy in the face of rising fascism. When allegiances to nation states and national leaders was on the rise, the church called Jesus' followers back to their primary allegiance. Perhaps this reminder is valuable for us today, too.]

The three scriptures that we have read each say something about the kingdom of God, the reign of Christ. In the Luke snippet, Jesus is telling the Pharisees that the kingdom is not just a future hope, it is here, among us, it is already in our midst. In John 18, Pilate is trying to understand how Jesus is the King, and Jesus says that his kingdom, his realm, will not compare to a world's kingdom. His kingdom will not come about by a military coup or a democratic election. Jesus' kingdom is more than that, different than that. And then in Revelation, we have a marvellous passage which describes the risen Christ in such exalted language - firstborn of the dead, ruler of the kings of the earth, the one who is and was and is to come, the alpha and omega (A to Z), from creation to the end of time.

So where is the kingdom of God, the realm of God? The answer is ... Yes! This is one of the lessons of the church year as a whole – all of these things are true. We live in a story larger than we can imagine. The realm of God was since the creation of the world, and is among us, and is to be more fully known. If that's hard for us to wrap our heads/hearts around, that's why we need concepts like the Trinity to hold some amazing, mysterious tensions together, and if you want to ponder this more, I recommend Richard Rohr's book on the Trinity, *The Divine Dance*, which is in our library.

We will chew on this mystery our whole lives, but Psalm 139:7-10 has a good reminder for us - we cannot not be in the presence of God. “Where can I go from your Spirit?” Nowhere. Jesus

spent a great deal of his ministry trying to break down the false distinctions between “God’s here” and “God’s not there.” He dared to see God everywhere, even in sinners, in enemies, in failures, and in outsiders.

This is a huge source of comfort for us, that the kingdom is among us and also not fully here, because now we need to talk about suffering. Which is a very real thing on this earth and in our lives.

Kate Braestrup is a chaplain to law enforcement officials in the parks and forests of the state of Maine. She walks alongside people who are on search and rescue missions, responding to danger and disaster, including excruciating things like abductions and murders. Kate offers a good image for experiences of suffering. She talks about the “hinges of human experience, moments where some lives are altered or ended and others swung in wholly unpredicted directions” (Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, 149). I’m sure you can think of some “hinge experiences” in your life, in the life of your families, in the life of this congregation. Moments where we talk about before ... and after. Before our Mom died ... after the accident ...

Sometimes these hinge moments become, as the Celtic tradition says, “thin places,” when the veil between earth and heaven seems to be more permeable. Times like births and transitions to death, and sometimes also times of deep woundedness, when we experience sacredness in a different, deeper way. When we become open to new wisdom, growth and comfort. Sometimes suffering can encourage spiritual meaning.

And sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes, as individuals, when we are faced with deep loss, deep darkness, we cannot find God. We cannot imagine hope. We can barely breathe through the day. We are shattered.

And that is where we need, desperately need, the church, the reign of Christ. We need each other. Even though it’s messy and uncomfortable and the last thing we want to ask for. Sometimes we need the community to speak of God, to describe hope, on our behalf, because our words, our faith is silent. When some of us lose hope, this congregation will keep speaking about God. Dear people near us will keep speaking words of hope on our behalf, words about God’s goodness, about the future. And slowly, we may be able to speak of God again. Faith, thank God, is a corporate task. We can stand in for each other, take turns.

Back to Kate Braestrup, the chaplain to suffering. Kate says, “If you decide that the most important thing, the highest possible value, is life – breath in the body and walking around and eating sandwiches or whatever – then you’re lost. Then you’ve lost. Because we’re all going to die ... So if I posit instead that the most important thing is love, then what I have is, yes, I have a world that’s full of suffering and evil and pain. And I have something to do. I have something to look for, and I have something to do. For me that works better.” (Tippett, 153) “I look for God’s work always in how people love each other.”

Denise and Les and I were recently visiting with fellow Christians in Palestine & Israel. I would like to introduce you to two women who taught me something about suffering and love and resurrection.



This is Violette, a feisty, indomitable spirit. She is a Christian Palestinian Arab Israeli which means that she has Israeli citizenship and a passport. Violette was a pharmacist in Nazareth for 45 years and claims she knows everyone in Nazareth. When Israel became a state in 1948, many Palestinians from the Galilee region were displaced to Lebanon, Syria and West Bank, but some went to Nazareth. The town of 10,000 at the time was inundated by 25,000 refugees. Prime Minister Ben Gurion didn't want a massacre in the Christian town of Nazareth because he didn't want to infuriate the Christian world. So, these Palestinians were given citizenship, but it was a second class citizenship, separated from Jewish Israeli life – separate school systems, curriculum, tax systems. For example, when Violette purchased a new pharmacy in the 1970s, she and a Jewish colleague applied together for a government grant. Her Jewish colleague received 120% of the grant and a 5 year tax exemption. Violette received no grant and was taxed between 35-45%.

In the 1990s, Violette was a founding member of Sabeel which is a Christian Ecumenical Theology Centre committed to a non-violent response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Violette says it is her Christian duty to work for justice & peace, that the life of abundance promised in John 10 should be a gift available to everyone, that all people are made free by Christ and we need to treat them that way. In the midst of years of discrimination, Violette is in her eighties now and appears to be fearless. She says, "I believe in the resurrection, I believe in Christ. If we do what we can, Jesus will bless our offerings."



Les and I had the privilege of staying with Widad in her home in Beit Sahour just east of Bethlehem. We could see the Church of the Nativity from Widad's courtyard. Widad is a Christian Palestinian with a West Bank ID which means she cannot travel in Israel proper, including Jerusalem, without a military permit. She is a retired school teacher, a mother and grandmother, and a most gracious host. She generously

shared her home, her food, and stories from her life. The story I share with you today happened in 2002, during the second intifada, when the Siege of Bethlehem occurred. Some of you may remember this. Several armed Palestinians and many unarmed Palestinians took refuge in the Church of the Nativity for many weeks in 2002. Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour were under military curfew for months which was only lifted for a few hours at a time every few days in order to allow people to go out to get food and other supplies. During this time, Widad's husband was dying of cancer and she had four small children at home. When her husband was hospitalized, Widad needed to make very difficult choices about whether she would risk arrest to go out to visit him in the hospital, or if she was at the hospital when the curfew was declared, whether she would risk arrest to go back to her children. When her husband died, her own parents and siblings were not able to gather for the funeral because of the curfew. As Widad told us about these harrowing days, it was as though she was reliving them again, with all their pain and impossible choices. But this suffering is not the whole of Widad's life. When we first arrived at her home, three of her adult daughters and their small children stopped by to say hi to us. There was much joy and laughter and love. Widad's children and grandchildren call forth her hope for the future. Life is difficult for all of them. Work is hard to find, wages are low, but Widad stubbornly loves her children and grandchildren into the future.

There is an Arabic word for this steadfast perseverance illustrated by Widad and Violette. The word is "sumud." We witnessed sumud, this ecology of resilience, in many people we met. People who insist on believing that justice and peace will rain down eventually, that injustice cannot halt resurrection.

(from Sabeel's *Contemporary Way of the Cross*)

**They have threatened us with Resurrection**

There is something here within us  
which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest,  
which doesn't stop the pounding deep inside.  
It is the silent, warm weeping of women without their husbands  
it is the sad gaze of the children fixed there beyond memory .....

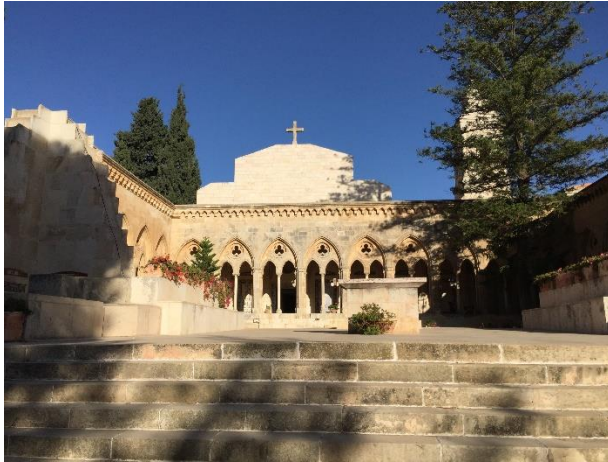
What keeps us from sleeping  
is that they have threatened us with resurrection!  
Because at each nightfall  
though exhausted from the endless inventory  
of killings for years,  
we continue to love life,  
and do not accept their death!  
In this marathon of hope  
there are always others to relieve us  
in bearing the courage necessary .....

Accompany us then on this vigil  
and you will know what it is to dream!  
You will then know how marvellous it is  
to live threatened with resurrection!

To live while dying  
and to already know oneself resurrected.

- Julia Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan*

While we were in Palestine & Israel, we prayed the Lord's Prayer together each morning as part of our devotional gathering. Near the end of our time there, we were staying in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, in a guest house close to the MCC office. During some free time one day, Les and I walked over to the Church of the Pater Noster on the Mount of Olives.



Pater Noster is Latin for Our Father. This church is built over a grotto believed to be the place where Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer to his disciples.



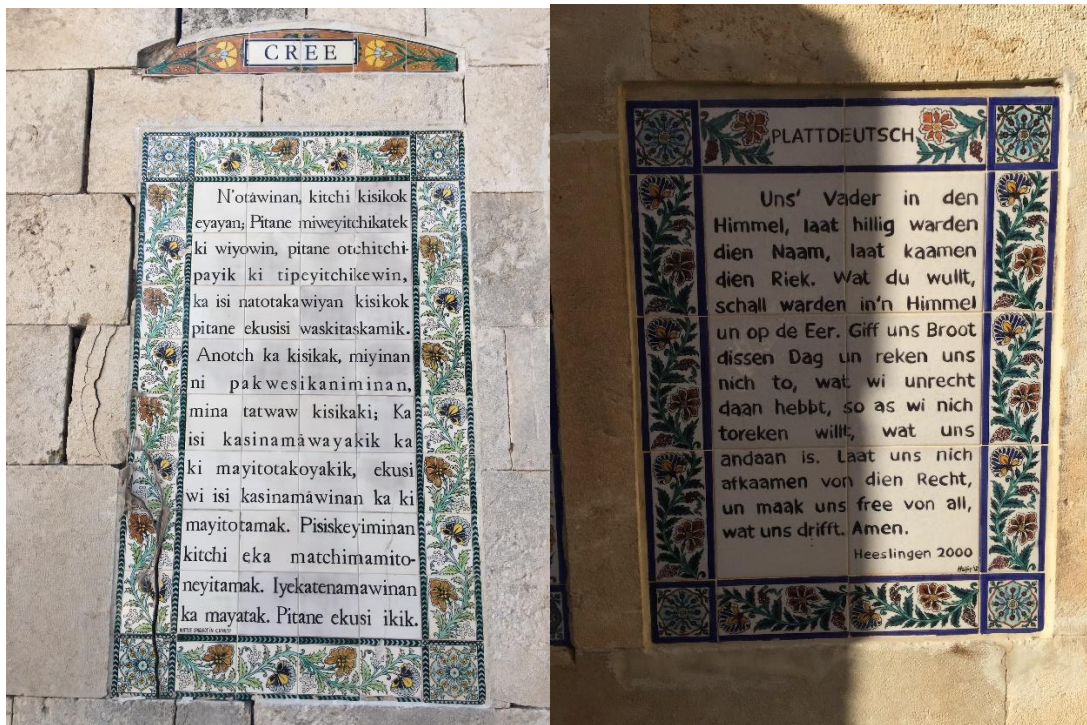
To the west there is an incredible view of the Old City of Jerusalem, which some call the universal city, which should belong to everyone.



In and around the church, there are beautiful tiles with the Lord's Prayer in 140 languages,

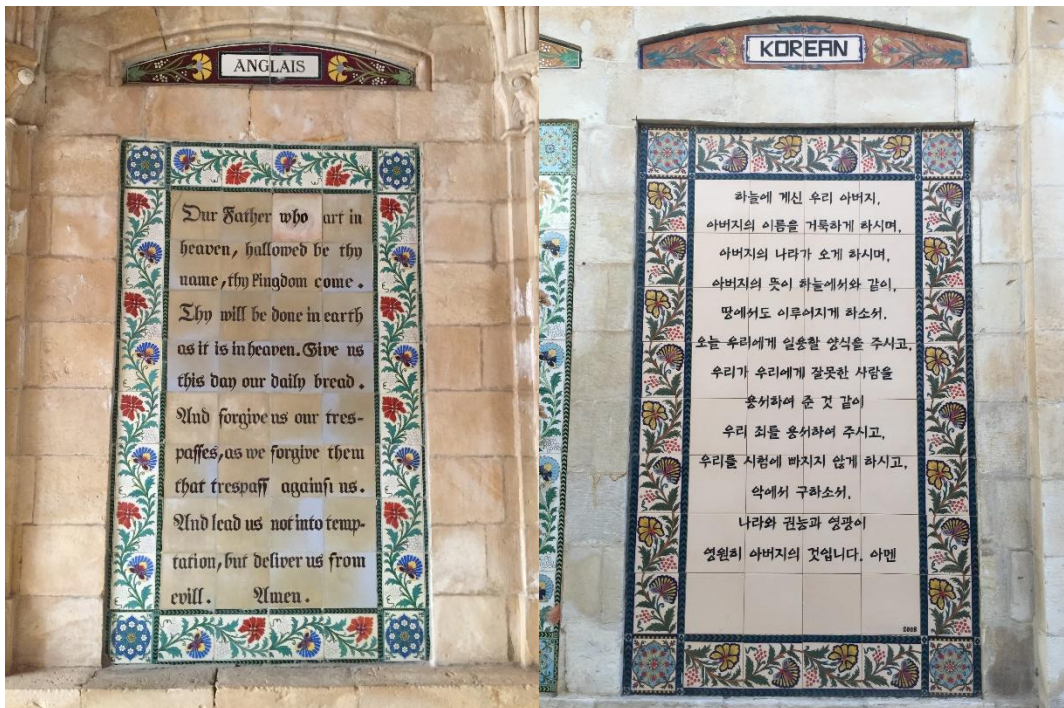


including Cree and Low German.



On this last Sunday of the church year, in the midst of our collective losses and grief, we declare our lives to be with Jesus the Christ. The Holy Spirit is with us, among us, in the intricate details of our lives, bringing resurrection hope.

On this last Sunday of the church year, I invite us to speak together the Lord's Prayer over our world – as a prayer of declaration, of protest, of sustenance, of hope, and of identity.



Let's pray together ...