

## *GOD'S LOVING CARE*

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield, June 21, 2020  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Martinsburg, West Virginia  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Pine Grove, Bluemont, Virginia

With the many different nations, and several races with a variety of cultures, the world that God has made is developed into a plurality of peoples. In the midst of this mixture, at the beginning of Matthew's "Missionary Discourse"<sup>1</sup>, Jesus gives the twelve Apostles the authority to proclaim God's Kingdom, cure the sick, raise the dead, and cast out unclean spirits. But Jesus also warns them of the challenges they will face as he sends them out.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said that the disciples, and this includes all of us who follow Jesus Christ can expect the same trials that he himself endured, for "a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master."<sup>3</sup> People will disagree with the disciples, and those who follow Jesus will be misunderstood, and may even be persecuted. But in the end our Lord declares, the truth will prevail, and the inaccuracies of those who misunderstand will be made clear. Thus the teachings that Jesus has given the disciples, in private Matthew maintains, are to be proclaimed "from the housetops so that all can hear."<sup>4</sup>

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus adds an assurance: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."<sup>5</sup> They threaten only the

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<sup>1</sup> Oehring, H. King, Editor; *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 7, 2014\_PNSMI Publishing Co., Boyds, MD; Matthew 10:1-11:1:page 1*

<sup>2</sup> *Revised Common Lectionary, Episcopal Edition; Church Publishing Incorporated, New York, 2007, Matthew: 10:7-8: page 149*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.: Matthew 10:24*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.: Matthew 10:27*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid. Matthew 10:28a*

physical body, but the soul cannot be killed and will live on in heaven with its, “new kind of body, a spiritual body” that is eternal.

St. Paul describes this new spiritual body in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*. St. Paul is telling us what happens at death when he talks about a new kind of being, a soul with a spiritual body. Paul writes, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead, what is sown (our physical body) is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.<sup>6</sup> Our present physical bodies die, but the eternal soul involves a “spiritual body.” It is recognizable as the disciples knew Jesus was with them after that first Easter in His new spiritual body. It is why in the great Creeds of Christendom that we use in our worship, the *Apostles Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*, we confess “I believe in the Holy Spirit....the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”<sup>7</sup>

Instead of fearing death, along with the disciples and those who have gone on before us we are to live in awe of God who loves us so much that even the hairs on our heads are numbered.<sup>8</sup> In times of trial, we are not to be afraid, for we always depend on God’s ultimate care. Matthew reminds us in our Gospel lesson that the Lord knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, and the disciples are quote “of more value than many sparrows.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible NRSV: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, I Corinthians 15:42-44. page 177*

<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer; Church Hymnal Corporation, New York; 2007, The Apostles Creed, pg. 96, The Nicene Creed pg.358*

<sup>8</sup> *opp.cit.:Matthew 10:30*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid: Matthew 10:31*

Currently, there is tremendous unrest over the unjust killing of black people by the white police of our nation who are called to keep the peace. Racism has been an issue in our country for over four hundred years. The protestors of this treatment have cried out that “black lives matter.” Each person is important. Professor of Political Science and author Melissa Harris-Perry wrote, “Ralph Ellison described the recognition issue for black Americans as being an invisible man. Betty Friedman lamented it as the “problem that has no name.” LGBT Americans have long identified it as “the closet.” In each case, the challenge is the same: a lack of fair and accurate recognition.<sup>10</sup>

Our lesson from Genesis today, the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Isaac is the age old problem of people of God’s earth. Who is acceptable and who is not? Who gets to judge? The people with the power.

Prior to today’s lesson, the Lord had promised Abraham a legacy of land and descendants.<sup>11</sup> When Abraham’s wife Sarah did not produce a child, Sarah gave her Egyptian slave girl Hagar, to Abraham. She was his wife to bear him a son. In the ancient Near East such surrogate motherhood was an accepted practice. The offspring would be considered as Sarah’s. Thus Hagar conceived and bore a son named Ishmael, to whom the Lord promised descendants.<sup>12</sup>

But when Sarah finally bore her own son, Isaac, she went to Abraham and demanded that he cast out Hagar and Ishmael to insure that Isaac

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<sup>10</sup>Harris-Perry, Melissa quoted by Susanna Metz in *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 7: Culture*,: PNSMI Publishing, Boyds, MD, June 22, 2014, page 3

<sup>11</sup>opp cit. *The Holy Bible NRSV, Genesis 17:1-8*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid. Genesis: 16:1-13*

would be Abraham's sole heir. Abraham was greatly distressed by Sarah's demand; but Sarah's insistence on the protection of Isaac's *right of inheritance* took precedence over Abraham's concern for Ishmael's welfare. The Lord told Abraham to do as Sarah asked, and added further assurance that Ishmael also would share in future promises.

Isaac's birth reopened festering wounds and simmering jealousies. Sarah drove Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Wandering in the desert of Beersheba, without water, Hagar abandoned Ishmael to die "and began to sob" with the love of a mother for her child. The Genesis author invokes a delightful word play on Ishmael's name to make his point, saying "God heard the boy crying," which is close to the Hebrew translation for Ishmael's name which was "*God hears*." Yahweh then made an extraordinary promise to Hagar that is almost identical to the pivotal promise made to Abraham: "I will make him into a great nation.....God was with the boy."<sup>13</sup>

Ishmael, the heir of the Arab race, Islam, cousin to Jews and Christians (all three races trace their founding ancestry to Abraham), bears a name that signals a promise to every human being. God is not deaf, dumb or blind. God is not an absentee landlord deity. God sees every human misery. God hears every painful sob. The Hebrews would learn after four centuries of slavery and exploitation under Egypt, "God heard their groaning."<sup>14</sup> Knowing and believing was the first step in their

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* Genesis 21:18,20; cf. 12:2

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* Exodus 2:24

transformation and liberation from bondage. The same is true for us today: Ishmael, *God hears*.<sup>15</sup>

From the time of Genesis, Jews, Islamists, and Christians have been rival religions and there have been wars and prejudices against each nation. The rivalries are mirrored by the racial war of black versus white, which has been brought to the forefront by the protests that black lives matter.

The recent demonstrations over recognition of black personhood today reminded me of the march in Selma, Alabama in 1965. At that time, the issue was over the voting rights being denied to many black persons.

The clergy of the Diocese of Delaware had a meeting with the Bishop to decide if the clergy should send a representative group to Selma. The Rev. Quintin Primo, the black Rector at St. Matthews Church was irate and most disturbed at the way the black people were being brutalized in Selma.

Everyone put their name in the hat, but without even looking at the name on the first slip of paper he drew, Bishop Brooke Moseley looked at me and called my name! Four other young clergy were selected as the Bishop called their names.

I went home, wrote out my resignation from the church and met with the Sr. Warden. I gave him the resignation. I told him, that he and the Vestry did not have to accept it, and I hoped they would not. I did not want to do anything that would hurt Christ Church. I went home, called a friend that owned All American Aviation Company. He arranged for a twin engine Beechcraft plane with a pilot and steward. They flew the five of us to Montgomery, Alabama where we got a ride to Selma.

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<sup>15</sup> opp. cit. Clendenin, Dan: Notes to Myself 6/13/05, quoted in Synthesis; page 3

The first march was brutally challenged as Chief Clarke's police rode horses into the protestors. Some of the police advanced with German Shepherd dogs on leashes. Many people were knocked down and were beaten by police. I was near Congressman John Lewis of Baltimore who was taking part in the marches at Selma. He was hit over the head by a policeman with a wooden club that cracked his skull open. Someone got an ambulance for him and he was rushed to the hospital. He was fortunate to remain alive and go on to serve in the Congress.

It was a terrible day, the police on horseback and with dogs charged into the peaceful demonstrators hurting many people. It was called "Bloody Sunday." I still shudder when I remember that day. As I saw them coming, I retreated to the side of the road, out of the way. It was the ending of my protest that day. I felt there was no sense in being run over by the police advance coming down the road. Furthermore, I felt it made no sense to be arrested so I retreated to the side of the road.

We spent the night at Brown's Church, the black church. The next morning, we all assembled in the nave of the church. The church was crowded. People from all walks of life. Some people had tape on their heads where they had been beaten.

The leaders of the Civil Rights protest, Whitney Young, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King, and others took turns speaking. They prepared the group for the march that day. It was ironic, we sang many Negro Spirituals that reminded me how the slaves had used the songs to send messages *to* each other when working in the fields. *Go Down Moses*, which went "*When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go,*" had nothing to do with Egypt, but was the signal that one or several slaves were

going to leave that night on *the underground railroad* to flee to the north!  
“*The Lord told Moses what to do...let my people go...To lead the children of Israel through....let my people go...They journeyed on...And came at length to Canaan’s land...Oh let us all from bondage flee...let my people go...and let us all in Christ be free....let my people go.*<sup>16</sup> Here we were about to march at Selma, and we were singing the spirituals to get us ready to face the police and march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

*We shall overcome....We’ll walk hand in hand.....God is on our Side... We are not afraid, today..... We shall live in peace, someday.*<sup>17</sup> We sang Gospel music familiar to the black community. We were advised how to use our arms crossed to protect ourselves, how to disband in an orderly way if tear gas was used. Above all, we were to be orderly, not to hit back if hit by the police. Over and over, non-violence was stressed. It was to be a peaceful protest. We were not to go on people’s property, not to destroy anything in the town. The leaders were putting the protestor’s mind in a peaceful, quiet manner. We were not to shout, or call out at the police, not to speak to the people watching us.

We marched between lines of armed police on the sides of the road. An Officer occasionally would spin the chamber in his pistol and point it at us. I did not know what to expect. I remember thinking, “It doesn’t matter what happens to me. I’m here.I’m doing the right thing at the right time.” We crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Martin Luther King, knelt down and gave a prayer of Thanksgiving that we had arrived safely.

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<sup>16</sup> *Lift Every Voice and Sing, An African - American Hymnal; Church Publishing, Incorporated, New York: 1993 Go Down Moses # 228*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid. Lift Every Voice and Sing: We Shall Overcome; #227*

It was after the march that things began to happen. I was talking with several clergy people, when suddenly shots rang out. Jim Reeb, the Presbyterian Minister who was standing nearby was hit. Just then, a station wagon drove slowly down the street with its tailgate down. Two of us dove into back of the station wagon, and several other people later got into the car. The car was driven by Viola Liuzzo from Detroit, Michigan. She was driving people from Selma to Montgomery to catch their plane or whatever transportation they were using to get home. She was really a lifesaver for me. The pilot and steward were waiting at the airport to fly us back to Wilmington, Delaware. Tragically, Viola Liuzzo never made it home. On one of her runs, delivering protestors, a sniper, tragically shot her through the window of the car and killed her. She has been recognized as a martyr, along with Jim Reeb and several others who died at the Selma Civil Rights march.

At Christ Church Christiana Hundred, in Greenville, Delaware, the largest church in the Diocese of Delaware and a very influential parish, a special Vestry meeting was called. A prominent Vestryman from the South stood up and said, "This is not Ralph's battle, this is our battle." Several other influential men from the South also added their approval. The Vestry unanimously stood up, cheered and returned my letter of resignation. I was never so proud of a group of men and women. The next Sunday my sermon, told the story of the Lord's work in Selma, Alabama.

The Vestry took it upon themselves to call upon the few parishioners who were upset with my going to Selma. Not a single person left Christ Church Christiana Hundred. The Rector, The Rev. Dr. John Legare'



O'Hear, who had been away from Greenville and knew nothing about my decision to go to Selma, returned from a preaching mission to his home church in Charleston, South Carolina. He learned of my trip and gave his wholehearted appreciation and support.

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Voting legislation that year. I gave thanks for my safety, peace, and freedom. May God's Holy Name be praised with thanksgiving for the many blessings bestowed upon us. *Amen.*