Sermon 11-4-18

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I confess to waking up lately with some hopes dimmed. Eleven murders at the Pittsburgh synagogue, 2 African Americans murdered in Louisville, pipe bombs sent by a right wing terrorist may demand lamen. Orthodox theology tells us Jesus bore the sins of the whole world. Imagine the weight of every bitter family feud, every hate crime, and misguided tweet.

Jesus was under tremendous pressure. Mark tells us everywhere that Jesus went the crowds came seeking healthcare. At times people just grabbed Jesus seeking to be made whole.When Jesus sought renewal leave, the crowds tracked him down and in desperation forget to bring their lunches.

Jesus’ free-healthcare, easy forgiveness, and hopeful preaching made some enemies. The kingdom of God offended and challenged the empire of Rome. Jesus’ radical preaching made the moderates worry that Jesus might provoke Rome. Jesus is Lord means that Caeser, Donald, and Barak are not. Jesus was crucified by an alliance of religious and political leaders who believed Jesus threatened their hold on power. Jesus’ turning over the tables of the temple money changers gave his haters the incentive to kill him.

Jesus made religious enemies. The supposed orthodox called Jesus forgiving sins blasphemy; they chirped  “who can forgive sin but God alone?” (John) They could not stomach Jesus setting aside certain rules. At times they took up stones to murder Jesus, and at least once they tried to throw him off a cliff. The priests would incite the crowd to crucify Jesus.

Jesus bore the stress of disciples who continued to not get the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. They argued about who was the greatest and suggested, “Send the crowds away”, “Lord, call down fire on those unbelievers”,  and asked, “who sinned this man or his parents?” Dr. King lamented, “shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill-will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.” Surely Jesus bears the burden of our lukewarm acceptance and easy indifference.

Jesus bore the sins of the world, but Jesus does not go into the Garden of Gethsemane or atop this mountain of transfiguration alone. Jesus goes with Peter, James and John. Jesus finds hosts and confidants in Mary, Martha and Magdalene. We preachers may deride the disciples, but even friends who fall asleep or say the wrong things  offer us comfort. To know good but weary friends are napping in the waiting room corner is better than facing the crucible alone. Right before his passion, Jesus will ask, “keep watch with me, for my soul is overwhelmed with grief.” On the way of suffering “the daughters of Jerusalem” weep for Jesus. On the cross Mary, Magdalene, Joanna and James’ mom keep watch over our bleeding, dying Lord.

Oh friends, on this day that celebrates God’s grace given through flawed human forebears, do we take time to intentionally bare our souls with other imperfect people? How do we keep watch over each others souls? Jesus, fully

God and fully human, valued imperfect spiritual companions, and where two or three of us gather, Jesus will join us.

Jesus does not go alone to the mountain for prayer. No one can describe what happened there as they prayed. How do you describe the taste of God’s perfecting love or the feel of a holy supernova? Words always fail to describe the divine encounter. Mark speaks of a shining light and cleansing beyond anyone's understanding.

Elijah and Moses appear and talk with Jesus. On this All Saints Sunday, we remember that God keeps faith with those who have gone before us in faith.

Elijah and Moses talk with Jesus.  As Jesus feels the weight of the world, who does God send to care for Jesus? God does not send an angel. What do angels know about facing down Pharoah, Jezebel, Ahab or Pilate? God sends people. God sends Elijah and Moses, who have already imperfectly walked the crucible of spiritual leadership among sinful people. Moses faced Pharaoh; Elijah faced King Ahab. They chat with Jesus as he prepares to face Pilate. Moses knows the lukewarm fickleness of church-goers who complain after the Red Sea crossing and party with pagan abandon while Moses receives the Ten Commandments! Elijah knows how we church people will chase after prosperity gods and kill the prophets. Moses and Elijah know the weariness of leading a stiffnecked and hardhearted people. Elijah once cried out to God, “My God, my God, I am the only righteous person left!”

Oh, we belong to a great cloud of imperfect witnesses. May their stories become ours so that we might find hope, learn from their mistakes, and choose better paths. Let us get to know Elijah and Moses for ourselves.  Sometimes when I am low, I read Dr. King or find comfort in Moses’ struggle.

The appearance of Elijah and Moses remind us that our lives matter. Our lives have the potential to weave grace into history and hope into the world. God does not send Solomon, who squandered a kingdom, to Jesus. God did not send Eli the priest, who cared for his office more than justice, to comfort Jesus. God sent leaders who brought truth to power and led lukewarm people. God sent people who imperfectly did hard things.Our lives matter. Let us remember to live lives that matter.

Your life matters. Sometimes when I'm getting dressed I'll look in the mirror and I will see my dad looking right back. I say, “Hey Dad,” waving at myself. My dad, like yours, was not perfect. He could get so angry that all my neighborhood friends just scattered: “Purdue's in trouble… let’s go.” My dad grew up in a home with much physical, emotional, spiritual and other abuse. Dad crawled out of a hell hole, and yet Dad lived a life that mattered way in his work, church, and neighborhood. Dad’s younger sisters told us how Dad, as a 20 year old soldier in Korea, sent money to a Sunday school teacher so she might buy Easter and Christmas dresses for his younger sisters. Those dresses are gone but love endures forever. When my grandfather died, my brother gave Dad a note that he opened and handed to me, overcome by emotion and unable to find words. John’s note read: Dad, I will never be the father that you have been to me, for out of nothing you gave us love, and I will always give to my children out of your love”.   Your life matters. Live it for things that matter.

And suddenly the All Saints mountain top experience flashes to an end. Elijah and Moses return to heaven like lighting bolts dancing across the summer sky. Peter, James, and John stand mouths open, lost in wonder, love, and praise. Bewildered by the holy moment, they lack adequate words. Peter speaks, suggesting they encapsulate and enshrine this holy moment. Let’s build a sanctuary or retreat center and come back here to recapture the glory.  We tend to do that, to lovingly look backwards on a bygone era.

Jesus did not come to build a shrine or even write a book. Jesus came to build a spiritual kingdom rooted in love of neighbor as self. Jesus came to offer hope, preach good news, forgive sins, lift up the crushed, release the oppressed, stand with the outcast, feed the hungry, heal the sick, calm the mentally ill, embrace those labeled unclean, cast down the self-righteous, turn the other cheek, eschew violence, and take up the cross .Jesus does not build a retreat center but heads back down into the valley, sliding back under the heaviness of his vocation, tasting perfect love so that he might again shoulder the sins of the world and make a difference on earth and in heaven.

Jesus moves to the cross bolstered by the holiness of radiant worship and words from Elijah and Moses. The saints go before us showing us the way and strengthening us for the journey. Oh friends, if our lives are to matter, we need to reconnect to what matters in worship. Radiant worship lifts us into the realms of faith, hope and love - righteousness, justice, mercy, and humility. In our striving to live under the weight of this word, may our worship empower and align us with God and our sisters and brothers, so that God’s kingdom might come among us and through us, on earth as in heaven.

So with Jesus, Peter, James, and John let us march forward from glorious mountain tops of worship. We do not go alone, the saints go before us, and even our now sleeping friends may wake up and help us. Let us not enshrine past glories, but carry God’s light into a dim world. Let us face Pharoah, Ahab, and Pilate. Let’s feed, clothe and comfort. Let us put our hands and shoulders towards improving this world, helping lift its weight off of others.  Elijah says, “confront the idolatry of a nation that only values prosperity gods, and smiling saying “you are not the only righteous one left, God has millions.” Moses tells us to always remember to say “let my people go” and to stay humble. And Jesus says you are forgiven, you are beloved, now get cracking; others need your help. Amen.