Ash Wednesday February 10, 2016

The prophet Joel calls the people to “Blow the trumpet… sound the alarm!” A moment later, he says, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast…” Same trumpet, two messages. What do we make of that?

As a pastor of many (many!) years, Ash Wednesday found me sounding the biblical trumpet. Mine is a shofar made of kudu horn – mislabeled “ibex.” A quick on-line search will show one that the horn of an ibex ranges from straight to evenly curved, that of a kudu is curly! One horn, two names. Another quandry!

In the gospel of St. Matthew, we hear Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount. If one relied upon that three chapter “sermon” alone for understanding the faith, one would do well! It is in that summary treatment of the faith that we hear Jesus articulating some of the faith’s central practices: praying (privately and not publicly), fasting (secretly and not looking like it), and not (definitely not!) blowing one’s own horn in the public places. To blow the horn or not to blow the horn – that is the question.

I find a Stop Hunger Now meal packaging event to be highly spiritual. In Joel-like fashion, a company of people has heard the alarm sounded by hungry people and answered the bell! The alarm is sounded – that is, the gong is rung, and loudly! Participants may not have literally “fasted,” but they have denied themselves resources that are then devoted to the wellbeing in the form of food for others.

However our faith finds expression this Lent, may we hear the alarm sounded by those who suffer. And may we answer their cries by living into the faith as we have received it.

Prayer: God of all times and seasons, may we hear the clarion call that it is time to put flesh on our skeletal faith, to rise up to the challenges your suffering people face and to offer them mercy – in your name, O Jesus, Amen.

Rev. Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina

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Rev. Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
First Sunday in Lent  February 14, 2016


The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor

I’m pretty old, which may be why I don’t remember Valentine’s Day falling on one of the Sundays of Lent. The season of Lent moves around, we know, because the dating of Easter is determined by when the first full moon occurs on or after the vernal equinox, and it’s the first Sunday after that. I’ve read that dozens of times over the years – and might understand it if I knew a vernal equinox when I saw one.

St. Valentine is a bit of a puzzle, too. Stories abound about several Jesus followers named Valentine. One comes from the time of Claudius the Cruel, who had a hard time recruiting soldiers because men cared so deeply for their wives and children. CC’s solution was to banish marriage! The priest Valentine is alleged to have performed weddings in secret, earning for his efforts both beheading and sainthood. He stood up for lovers, and we are grateful every February 14.

Jesus also stood up for people downtrodden. In his first (and last?) sermon “back home” in Nazareth, he stood up for those who were poor, captive, blind and oppressed. In doing so, he stood beside the prophet Isaiah, who stood behind that same word. For his neighbors, it was a disturbing word.

Lent calls us to take that kind of stand. Will we offer food to hungry people? Comfort to those who suffer? Lift the burdens of those weighed down? May we be disturbed enough by the pain of people in such places that we act, in Jesus’ name.

Prayer: In you, O Jesus, an ancient word came into full view. Show us that word in all its clarity, and invite us to follow where you lead. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
In Advent we heard the angel Gabriel say, “Do not be afraid,” and not just once. He said it to the old priest, Zechariah, to the not yet mother of our Lord, Mary, and to some shepherds watching their flocks by night. Gabriel’s message covered quite a range of recipients!

Some read the Bible as a fear filled volume. But Gabriel says what the whole text says in many ways: “Do not be afraid.” But how much of the grand sweep of the biblical narrative does give cause for fear? There is the oppression in Egypt, the perils of the wilderness, the suffering of the exile. There’s war and intrigue and betrayal, sickness and death – and of course, that’s not limited to the Bible.

For people of faith, Jesus articulates that message the best. He lived among us fearlessly, even though there was much to fear! When on the sea or among the fishermen or on the mountain or at the tomb Jesus also says, “Do not fear,” the message holds up.

Lent can draw us to those with much to fear – fears covering a range of not having enough to eat, or finding shelter, or not surviving uprootedness and violence. Can we simply say to them, “Do not be afraid?” St. James might not think so: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:15-16). So for the Lord’s people, the message of “do not be afraid” is accompanied by action.

Prayer: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?... Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.” (Psalm 27:1,3)

Rev. Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
The musical, Les Miserables, opens with prisoners who are singing in utter despair, “Look down, look down, you’ll always be a slave, look down, look down, you’re standing in your grave.” What could be more bleak? Our hero, Valjean, took bread for a starving child. He, too, is caught up in looking down, but continues to lift the prayer of the innocent: “I’ve done no wrong, sweet Jesus, hear my prayer.” As the story unfolds, Valjean’s song changes to, “Freedom is mine. The earth is still. I feel the wind. I breathe again. And skies clear. The earth is waking. Drink from the pool. How clean the taste. Never forget the years, the waste.” He will have much more to face!

The Isaiah text comes from a hopeful-but-not-yet period in the life of Israel. Deliverance from a longer captivity than Valjean’s is on the horizon, but in the meantime, the oppressive hunger, thirst, and mistreatment at the hands of their captors continue unabated. Hear Isaiah’s invitation to “look up:”

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1)

What a total turnaround – from being completely dependent upon one’s captors for every drop of water, very speck of food, now with wine and milk, the stuff of long forgotten dreams.

In Lent, my thoughts are drawn to those not just without hope but those for whom hopes have not come to pass – yet. The Lenten tradition of sacrifice opens the way for us to help those hopes happen. Those partnering with Stop Hunger Now are filling a hope for food and medicines, education, vocational training and more. If we invite such hopeful people to “look up,” what will they see?

Prayer: Holy Lord, who has given yourself for us, our prayers are for those who face suffering, hunger and oppression every day. May we in some way help their hopes come true. In your precious name we pray, Amen.

Rev Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
Fourth Sunday in Lent   March 6, 2016

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

For many Christian denominations, the fourth Sunday in Lent is always One Great Hour of Sharing.

Different of our “tribes” understand that differently, but what those who mark the day share is this:

One Great Hour is a Christian effort to empower, provide water, supply food, and give relief from disasters. (onegreathourofsharing.org)

I’m proud to be affiliated with Stop Hunger Now, with which I’ve been acquainted since its founding in 1998. The principles of “One Great Hour” align in many ways with those of Stop Hunger Now.

The gospel text guides us through the arduous journey of that Prodigal Son. One who begins that journey with all the resources (his share of the family wealth) and bravado a person could need to pursue life in the big city. He loses it all – money, dignity, power … from the pig pen, perhaps he feels that he has become a disaster – or as we might say now, a hot mess!

But for him, the light went on. He thought, even my father's servants have more bread than they need. I've messed up being a son; maybe I can be a servant. And off he goes, carrying the burden of that hope. When his father runs to greet him, he can barely begin his well-rehearsed speech when his father moves to restore him – robe, ring, shoes, and feast. He is once more empowered, with sonship and plenty.

What did he do to earn that? Or deserve that? Clearly on both counts, nothing. Sometimes I hear that about people we want to offer food or water or medicine … or dignity. They’ll never learn! we hear. As people of faith, we claim this story as part of our story. God meets us where we are, wanting only good for his children. As people of faith, we can be part of that restoration. Are we called to do that?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you spoke as if you knew the heart of the Prodigal, once lost, then found, once devastated, then restored. Is that not your desire for the whole human family? Call us, too, to be as gracious as that gospel father! In your name we pray, Amen.

Rev Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
While Lent can be observed, or practiced, with a theme of sacrifice, I am compelled to offer a meditation on those who have little, if anything, to “give up.” Even in our affluence, we are reluctant to let go a meal a week, or even consume less at a meal, even if in so doing we could devote the resources saved to those who need it. One does not have to read the Bible for long without sensing a deep sense of loss – poverty, sickness, war, famine, drought... and death. Sound familiar?

I am not certain when Psalm 126 was written, but in all its ancientness, it resonates with this the twenty-first century. It’s one of the shorter psalms. Reversing the usual order, it begins in celebration: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy… (126:1-2)

But the psalm seems to recognize immediately that “restoration” is not complete: Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. (126:4-6)

Isaiah is a little easier to “date” than the psalm. Chapter 43 seems to have arisen when for captive Israel, hope of release, or deliverance, had begun to build. Articulating the word of the LORD, Isaiah reminds the people of the One who made a way even in the sea, who overcame the mightiest army on earth. But don’t just look back, he says: the LORD is doing a new thing. The way through the wilderness amid streams of water will carry them home once more.

We also live in a world of the uprooted. Refugees are in the news – if their boat sinks or they arrive at the border. What if God is calling us to join in the “new thing,” to make a way for them?

Prayer: LORD of every people, whose special concern is for those on the margins, draw them to a place where relief is at hand. May there be abundant seed for sowing and an ample harvest. If we are to be a part of that, so let it be! Amen.

Rev Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
Palm/Passion Sunday March 20, 2016


Many of us readily picture Jesus riding into Jerusalem – on the back of a donkey. That story has been special to me since earliest childhood. One imagines a kind of a grand parade, with people joyfully greeting Jesus along the way.

It wasn’t until I was an adult working as a chaplain at Philmont Scout Ranch that I learned the legend of the donkey, and the cross on its back. It’s harder to see on the backs of darker colored ones, but on the grey or white ones – there it is! The story goes that it is there because one of their kind carried Jesus into Jerusalem. One story even has the little burro offering to carry the cross! So next time you see one (Equus africanus africanus), look for the cross, and remember the story.

Yes, it’s just a story. But perhaps there comes from the old story a word about willing and humble service. Are we not also called to such a life of service?

Liturgy of the Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

As Palm Sunday turns toward Holy Week and Good Friday, people of faith are drawn into a most difficult narrative of betrayal, suffering and death. What could move us more deeply than to identify with all that the One we follow has endured?

Some find it enormously comforting to meditate upon Jesus identifying with all those who suffer now, whether from sickness, oppression, captivity, abandonment – or simple hunger and thirst. Some are moved to act on behalf of those for whom any kind of normal life is elusive. Organizations like Stop Hunger Now provide a mechanism to act, to offer to such people the basics of life. What could be more humble than an offering of rice, soy, vegetables and vitamins?

Whatever our offering, perhaps we will find a way to identify with these around us who suffer. May we continue to hope that they, too, will live again.

Prayer: Most gracious God, who has given us the One to show us the way, One in whom you come alive for us. Show us the way to life, and the way to share the goodness of life with the entire world. In your hope filled name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, North Carolina
Easter Sunday March 27, 2016


What would it have been like to interview Mary Magdalene right after the resurrection? While the four gospels differ in some of their details, they are in agreement that Mary Magdalene was the first eyewitness to see the risen Jesus.

If you’re of a certain age, you’ll remember Sergeant Joe Friday (Jack Webb) of TV’s Dragnet, who with Officer Bill Gannon (Harry Morgan), served and protected the people of the city. Encountering witness after witness bent on embellishing what was seen and heard, Friday typically said, “Just the facts, ma’am.” An excited Mary must have been bubbling over, spilling her news and every detail — the stone was rolled away, the burial clothes were just so, the angels here and here… a voice, and there he was – Jesus! Would anyone have dared to reign her in and say, “Just the facts, ma’am?”

The rest of the disciples were pretty shaky about her report. John has two of them racing to the tomb and finding her testimony partly true, at least… tomb empty, clothes - but where was he? Luke (later) will have the disciples regarding it all as “an idle tale.”

For people of faith, Easter is about new life. How do we tap into that? We can celebrate the return of spring, seeds becoming sprouts. We can enjoy Easter eggs, and imagine the transformed life that emerges eggs hatch. Or we can take another step, visiting the places of suffering and near death that fill the world, and offer signs of life to the people. We can do that with food, with wealth, with love – even a combination of them all.

Mary Magdalene’s past is a troubled one. However, in her brokenness, she is made new. She becomes a kind of sign for how such broken lives can be made new. Let us claim that for all who suffer.

Prayer: Thanks be to you, O God, for showing us that new life is within our reach. May we claim not only the stories of the people like Mary made new, but claim hope for all those who are in pain. Help us act on your behalf to share the gift of life, in the name of the Risen One, Amen!

Rev Steve Hickle, Faith Outreach Director
Stop Hunger Now, Raleigh, NC

www.stophungernow.org