

***Alleluiah, Anyhow!***  
**Proper23A, Track 2 (all)**  
**Grace Church Newton**  
**October 15, 2023**

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE HOMILY. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice (Phil. 4:4). Amen.*

What a study in contrast, huh? Today's readings offer some of the most famously comforting portions of scripture.

The *psalmist* insists on God's tender care for God's people:

- "The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want," they write.
- Green pastures, and still waters await.
- Even in the shadow of death, God is there to protect.
- The cup overflows.

And *Paul*, in the letter to the gathering in Philippi, adds to this sense of well-being in God. If we were to look at the opening verses of this letter, we would notice that Paul seems to save his most loving and affectionate greeting of all his epistles for this group of Christ-followers. And today's supportive and comforting words flow naturally from his affection:

- Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.
- The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.
- In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*Isaiah* continues, with images of God's bounteous feast offered on the Mountain of the Lord for all people. With foretelling of God destroying the shroud of mourning that was cast over Israel in exile. With the promise that God will wipe away the tears from all faces. For Isaiah, "this is the Lord for whom we have waited, / let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation" (Isa 25:9).

We know these selections from scripture. We could probably recite large portions of these readings by heart. They offer comfort and reassurance. They affirm the movement of God in the lives of the ancient Israelites, in the early Christian communities. And they continue to resonate with our experience of God to this day. My cup *is* overflowing. As the bells in the tower ring out again, we *do* rejoice today. The God of peace *is* with us.

That resonance may be why today's readings – when we add **Matthew** to our consideration – it may be why – as a set – they seem so / jarring. Right alongside “rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice,” I just stood in the center aisle and proclaimed a violent parable in which a King – assumed to be God – responds brutally to the refusal of his guests to join the banquet he has so abundantly prepared. And in the end, this King, full of wrath about the wardrobe of an unsuspecting wedding guest, orders him bound and thrown into the “outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13).

We can talk at another time – and we need to – about why this parable may have been retold by the author(s) of Matthew in this way. It doesn't appear at all in the Gospel of Mark, and it appears quite differently in the Gospel of Luke with much less violent imagery [[Source](#), p. 160]. So we do need to have that conversation b/c passages like this one have been mis-used and mis-appropriated through the centuries to fuel violent anti-semitic conspiracies in the real world. So, we need to have that conversation. But for today, let's place a marker on that. I don't want to bypass the responsibility to interrogate passages like this.

But today, instead of taking us down that path, here's where I'd like to go.

So we have famously comforting images – hymns of joy, abundance, comfort, the end of grief – on the one hand, // and a violently portrayed parable – anger, wrath, banishment – on the other.

That's one set of texts we work with each week – the ones we hear as a gathered community in worship. We also attend to a second set of texts, if you will. The text of what is happening in the world around us. And this dynamic that I felt in the readings – this jarring, unsettling juxtaposition – it permeates our world today. I feel it in this very place, on this particular day. On the one hand, we are reminded of the comfort and solace of the Holy One. We are called joyfully to celebrate Divine abundance that made possible the rebuilding and renewing of the bell tower. We rejoice in that accomplishment.

Simultaneously, hearing the gospel reading that suggests a casting out of those who don't follow a particular way of seeing the world.... It's impossible for me – and I'm sure for you – living in this area with friends and loved ones who have strong ties to the Holy Land not to also hold front and center the outbreak of war, the slaughter of innocents.

What a study in contrasts:

- Horror and beauty.
- Violence and peace.

- Sorrow and joy.

These contradictions that we sense so viscerally today – they bring us into the heart of our faith. We hold hope for a time when the reign of Christ will be realized here on the earth. We hold hope for that dreamed-of moment when God’s justice and peace will have dominion. And until that time, we live in this world. Here we are human. And imperfect.

And yet... into this imperfect world, sometimes God breaks through. Sometimes beauty and justice and peace and joy break through into the here and now. Theologians would describe this as living in a time of “already...but not yet.” And we feel that deeply today, of all days. As we sit with anger and heartbreak over the loss of innocent life that we in this community are so connected to. And simultaneously we rejoice and celebrate the accomplishments of this community, the bells ringing from the tower once again. “Already...but not yet.” To borrow a phrase from our late, beloved bishop, the Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris, we are living in a time of “Hallelujah, Anyhow!” [[Source](#)].

In this painfully imperfect world, today we are called to celebrate. In this of grief and sorrow, today we at Grace are a shining example of God breaking through – of the “already” amidst the painfully “not yet.” Hallelujah, Anyhow!

Here, together, in the presence of the Holy...here all of it can be held. As we gather around the altar together, and in some mysterious way meet each other and those who have gone before, and become one together as the body of Christ, that eternal moment can hold the beauty, and the sorrow, and the violence, and the joy. Already...and not yet. This is our faith. For today / we choose joy. Hallelujah, Anyhow!

Amen.