

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 11—Year A

Isaiah 44:6-8

Psalms 86:11-17

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

So many thoughts swirling today from the images in our scriptures. **Romans** gives us images that soothe our souls: **For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.** The very notion that, when we cry out to God from that place deep within, *because we simply don’t know what else to do*, it is **the Spirit itself** bearing witness with ours. Wow. That is some kind of **intimacy with God**. And the *reminder* that we have not received a spirit of slavery *to fall back into fear*, but we have been given a spirit of adoption, *a spirit of kinship with God*—that is **balm to the soul**.

And **Paul** doesn’t stop there, but he goes *deeper*.

Paul can assert that we have *already* received a spirit of adoption, *while at the same time* affirming that it is *something we are still waiting for*. Oh, he is the *master of paradox*.

Paul can be clear-eyed about the sufferings of this *present* time, completely validate that it’s hard right now, and *at the same time*, keep an eye firmly trained on the glory *about* to be revealed.

Paul can understand that something profound has *already* happened in Jesus, and that something is still very much *on the move*—that we, and creation itself, are in labor, yearning to be born anew, yearning to be set free from all the things that are binding us, yearning to reflect the glory that God intends.

And **Paul** ends with profound **HOPE**: For in **HOPE** we were saved. Now **HOPE** that is seen is not **HOPE**. For who **HOPES** for what is seen? But if we **HOPE** for *what we do not see*, we wait for it with *patience*. **Paul** reminds us that our wholeness is all wrapped up in **HOPE**. It’s *not something you can see*; it’s *something that we lean into with trust*, and it calls us to that holy and difficult practice of waiting with *patience*. Daggone that’s hard! It is *future-oriented*, and yet *sown in the past*, with the *possibility to transform the present*. **HOPE BENDS TIME**.

It’s the kind of **HOPE** that the Lord of Hosts speaks in **Isaiah**, reminding **Isaiah** and all the people of God: **I am the first and I am the last... Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.** Amidst *all the gods that call for our attention*—and let’s be honest, there are many—God is reminding us that there is **One who spans all of time—the alpha and the omega, the first and the last—the rock**—and when we stand on *this rock*, our footing is sure, and we need not fear, nor be afraid. Amidst the swirl and uncertainty that is life these days, this is immensely reassuring; this is a **solid place** where we can stake our **HOPE**.

This **HOPE** is rooted in *past experience*, which is what gives it the strength to look toward *the future*, and it *permeates our being the closer we draw to God*. The psalmist nails it: **For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the nethermost Pit...But you, O LORD, are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth.**

The psalmist has *experience* of a gracious God, a compassionate God, a slow-to-anger God, a kind God, a God who values truth, and a God who has delivered him from the pit, *probably more than once*.

And because of these experiences in the past, the psalmist can pray: Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; knit my heart to you that I may fear your Name. *Knit my heart to you, O Lord*—that is a prayer for all of us. And when our heart rests in God’s heart, then God’s way and God’s truth will become clear.

And this gritty HOPE and practice of waiting with patience also appear in the gospel today. Jesus is back at it with the crowds telling them a parable about sowing: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.” Predictably, when the grain comes up, so do the weeds.

The servants are mystified. “*Master, didn’t you sow good seed? Where did these weeds come from?*”

The master replies, “An enemy”—in the Greek, a “*hostile, hating, opposing*” one—has done this.”

“*Well, do you want us to yank those weeds up?*”

“*No, no, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.*” That’s patience; that’s wisdom.

Jesus goes on to tell the crowds a few more parables, and then he leaves them and goes into the house.

The disciples approach him—remember, *the disciples are the ones who don’t need the parables explained from last week—yeah, they need it explained to them*. The disciples are like that kid in the class who is brave enough to ask the question that everyone else is wondering about. **Shout out to the disciples!**

“Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” Jesus explains that the Son of Man sows good seed in the field of the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one—that one who is *hostile and hating and oppositional*—and the enemy who sows those seeds is the devil—*diabolos*, the one who always *seeks to throw things apart*. There is so much to meditate upon right there!

The language may feel archaic, but it feels very true to our time. There are forces that sow seeds of division, that seek to separate us and throw us apart from one another, and they are busy at work these days. It’s tempting to think we can go yank up those weeds and get rid of them right now. BUT JESUS COUNSELS PATIENCE AND TIME. Sometimes, it takes time to know what’s what. And something that’s a weed grows awfully close to something that’s going to bear good fruit. And truth be told, we tend to apply this parable as if it’s all external to us, but these good AND hostile, hating, opposing seeds are sown in our own hearts, in our own souls, in our own spirits.

No, Jesus says, wait until the harvest, when the reaping is in the hands of the angels. *They are skilled at discernment and gathering up those weeds and bundling them for the furnace; human beings, well not so much—we tend toward seeing everything as a weed, especially when we locate it in the other with whom we don't agree.*

And yes, Jesus does use that weeping and gnashing of teeth language—I so wish he didn't—but those potent images are the language of lament and anguish. Surely, the division and hostility consuming our world fills us with lament and anguish, *especially as we own our part of it. But the word for this furnace is also used for a smelting furnace, and that kind of furnace can forge something beautiful out of the fire.*

What Jesus is getting at is that some of this won't get sorted out until the end of time, and *at that time, hostility and hate and all that oppositional, divisive energy will be bundled and burned away—this hostile, divisive energy has no place in the kingdom that is to come. THERE, we are all set free to live lives fully aligned with God—God's peace, God's joy, God's justice, God's mercy, God's communion, God's LOVE—that's what it means to be RIGHTEOUS—it's a life lived in alignment at the deepest levels—and in the end, THAT'S the life that shines.*

In the meantime, we do the work to tend the garden, fully aware of all the forces at play—the good AND the hostile. This is classic Jesus be-wise-as-a-serpent-and-innocent-as-a-dove.

In the end, this long view—like that some of this won't get sorted out until harvest time at the end of the age—is what undergirds the kind of HOPE we see this morning from Paul and Isaiah and the psalmist.

It's the kind of HOPE that Nicholas Kristof wrote about this week in an editorial titled, *We Interrupt This Gloom to Offer...Hope*. At the end of the piece, Kristof quotes Senator Corey Booker who said this: **“HOPE right now in America is bloodied and battered, but this is the kind of HOPE that is successful...It's HOPE that has lost its naïveté.”**

It's the kind of HOPE that fueled John Lewis, who died Friday night of pancreatic cancer, and the kind of HOPE that he lived so powerfully throughout his life. John Lewis wanted to preach the gospel from an early age. As a young man, his brothers and sisters and cousins would gather up all the chickens, and he would preach to the chickens. He suffered so much in the fight for civil rights and human rights—beaten and imprisoned—very Acts of the Apostles and Paul kind of stuff—but his faith and all these experiences forged in him a relentless HOPE as he went on to serve in Congress for over 30 years.

As he announced his diagnosis this past December, Lewis said this: *“I have been in some kind of fight—for freedom, equality, basic human rights—for nearly my entire life. I have never faced a fight quite like the one I have now...I have decided to do what I know to do and do what I have always done: I am going to fight it and keep fighting for the Beloved Community. We still have many bridges to cross.”*

It was Lewis who continually asked of his fellow lawmakers: *“Where is the heart of this body, where is our soul? Where is our moral leadership? Where is our courage?”* His fellow lawmakers didn't always agree with him, but they respected his courage and moral leadership.

Upon Lewis' death, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said: *“Our great nation's history has only bent towards justice because great men like John Lewis took it upon themselves to help bend it.”*

Sometimes, we need icons to remind us what deep HOPE looks like in the flesh. Jesus calls us to it. The likes of Paul and Isaiah and the psalmist witness to it. John Lewis embodied it.

We need this HOPE *now* more than ever. The world needs this HOPE *now* more than ever.

It takes hard work, patience, and perseverance, *as well as* a willingness to knit our heart to God's, to live from *this* place, but frankly, *how else will we live at all?*

“We still have many bridges to cross” and fueled by this HOPE that we cannot see, with God's help, we will reach the other side. Amen.

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