

26th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
November 18, 2018

Text: Joel 2:21-27

Theme: Be Glad and Rejoice

It seems like every Sunday we lift up in prayer some tragedy that took place either in our own country or abroad. Devastating hurricanes and unprecedented fires have destroyed homes and hundreds of acres of land. Over this past year alone human lives have been shattered. It has been a long and difficult year.

I know the readings for this Sunday (the last Sunday in Pentecost) are centered on warnings about the end of times. In many ways I feel as if we have been living through some of those ordeals that are found in those lessons. I also understand that the love of God comes through those same passages. But in light of the week ahead I exercised my right to skip those lessons in favor of the ones that are assigned for this Thursday, our national day of thanksgiving. My decision does not mean that we will ignore or put on our blinders to the sufferings of others. Our daily prayers keep before us the concerns of the people and the concerns of the world.

Even Jesus intentionally took opportunities to leave the crowds who clamored for his attention. He needed some time with his heavenly Father and he needed some time to rest. In several places in Scripture we find Jesus telling his disciples to stay behind while he travels alone to find a secluded place to pray. Even Jesus needed to build up his strength to reenter the fray.

And it seems like the perfect week for us to do the same as we head into a long holiday weekend. In the midst of all that we have planned can we carve some time to dwell with God in solitude and prayer?

It was not that long ago that we had another dark and gloomy day that has seemed to plague us this fall. But on this one particular afternoon (about 4:30 pm) I was driving home from Alexandria and in the rear-view mirror there were these dark clouds and a light rain that mixed in with a touch of sun which meant I saw a glimmer of a rainbow. Within a few minutes the entire sky just lit up in this tapestry of orange and red colors that was sharp against the clouds.

It was so breathtaking that I pulled my car off to the side of the road so that I could take it all in. I paused to consider the God who could create such an amazing scene! And I know others noticed it as well because later that night I checked Facebook and there were several pictures posted of the same sky.

We do not always have to search for a secluded place to pray because there are moments like this one when God provides the place and the time. At the end of a dismal day God changed the scenery at the blink of an eye. We see that very thing happen in the first lesson.

In Joel the prophet called the people to repent of their sins as a plague of locusts swept across their country. The locusts destroyed the land and devastated the crops. But then Joel makes this sudden shift from warning to promise (as sudden a shift as the sky turned on that one day). Joel told the people that nothing in all of creation needed to be afraid! The soil was commanded not to fear because the Lord was about to do a great thing. The animals of the field were told not to be afraid because the pastures would return to their original luster. Trees would bear fruit and vines would produce grapes. And the people would have all that they needed to satisfy their hunger. For those who went out weeping, they would come home with shouts of joy.

During this week (as we carve some time to pray) it would be a good exercise of faith to contemplate all that has been destroyed by the fires and hurricanes and then rejoice in the Lord our God who has promised to restore his creation back to life.

In our second lesson we learn that our prayers are not only for all of God's creation but for all people because God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Our ability to pray in such an inclusive way sets us apart from those who pray solely for themselves.

In-between our services last week someone pulled me aside to talk about our liturgy. He loved that we include the confession of sin at every service but he suggested one change. When we get to the line where we say that *we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves*, he suggested we add that *we have not loved our enemies*. For him that is what makes us uniquely Christian. We can set aside our differences (and even our hatred) because only that will lead us to a peaceful life.

During this week (as we carve some time to pray) it would be a good exercise of faith to contemplate some of the ways that lives have been shattered and then rejoice in the Lord our God whose promise of salvation is for all people. No one is out of the realm of God's love.

And then in our gospel reading Jesus seems to affirm our desire to take a break from all the worries of this world.

What do we gain by worrying?

Will we add a single hour to our span of life?

Why do we worry about what we will eat or drink or wear?

We know we gain nothing by worrying. We know it reduces our life span. Most of us here are fortunate enough to have food on our tables and something to drink and something to wear. So we worry about some of the other things that seem to weigh down our lives. Some of us need better employment. Some of us have chronic health concerns and constant pains. Amanda and I attended a meeting this week in McLean to learn more about what our youth worry about that includes academics and the pressure to excel in everything. Later that same day Amanda attended a meeting to learn about young people who are homeless in our area. It should be added to our *worry* list.

Jesus said do not worry because when we worry we look at what we do not have instead of what he sees. Jesus sees a world of abundance and generosity and new life. Our call this week is to keep our eyes open to see where God is at work caring for a world that we worry about so much. We are to relax and breathe and count our blessings and trust in God's providence.

During this week it would be a good exercise of faith to decide what occupies your mind in worry and then pause and give thanks to the Lord our God for all that God provides for us and for all the different ways that God cares for us.

We have been richly blessed. We are to be glad and rejoice for the great things that God has done. We are to be glad and rejoice for who God is in our lives. To be thankful is much more than saying *thank you* out of habit. It is a way to experience the world in a new way, to perceive people with new eyes, and to allow ourselves to be surprised. To be thankful is to take nothing and no one for granted. It is to remember that all good things come from God.

So in the spirit of a thankful heart I offer you a thank offering from me to you – an extended prayer to use as you gather around the table on Thanksgiving Day (it is one of the bulletin inserts). I wrote the prayer based on Scripture. I hope it helps us pause long enough to rest our minds and spirits before we reenter the fray after the holiday weekend. Let it be a time of reflection and prayer that builds us up as the body of Christ. Amen