

**Nevertheless, We Persist**  
**Sunday, March 13, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Susan Russell**

Lent is launched. On Ash Wednesday we heard the words as familiar as their outward-and-visible signs etched on our foreheads: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” And last week we sang together the ancient words of the Great Litany ... and we heard once again the familiar gospel story that marks the beginning of every Lent: Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness.

The challenge, of course, is that the very familiarity of these Lenten rituals and stories can get in the way of our fully experiencing Lent as a journey.

You can’t live in Southern California and not know what it feels like to travel a familiar road without really "journeying." Years ago when I was a new deacon I served up at St. Mark’s in Altadena – and I lived in Huntington Beach! I remember how easy it was to suddenly look up and realize I was in Duarte ... and wonder what happened to Whittier! That's not a journey ... that's a commute.

There’s a BIG difference between the two – and my hope is that we do not become so focused on the commute to Easter that we fail to notice – to give thanks for – to respond to – the encounters we can and will have with the holy in the next 40 days – those “aha's” of God that will surprise, delight and inspire us.

And my prayer is that we be given the grace to not become so focused on our own “journey with Jesus” that we forget that as long as there are still strangers at the gate, walking humbly with our God is not enough -- remembering that there is still plenty of “doing justice” that needs done as part of our Lenten journey.

And just in case anybody *was* tempted to settle into commute mode, today’s Gospel definitely gives us something to pay attention to.

The Pharisees – think 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a combo of city council/vestry members – come out to warn Jesus that he’s finally gone too far with this peace on earth, good will to all stuff ... and that Herod was out to get him.

And what they get in response is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild – this is feisty Jesus, focused and riled. This is Jesus with some attitude.

Not missing a beat, he comes back at them with a message of that is the 1st century equivalent of the 21st century “Bring it on.”

*"Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way ..."*

He knows there will be consequences for the actions he is taking – the journey he is making. He knows there will be a price to pay for his obedience to the call to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ... to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free.

He knows that what is good news to the poor and oppressed is not so good news to the privileged and the oppressor – and that releasing the captives isn't popular with those who hold the keys.

It's the same message that almost got him tossed off a cliff the first time he preached it to the hometown folks in Nazareth – and his poll numbers haven't exactly been going up with the inside the Jerusalem Beltway crowd.

Nevertheless, Jesus is willing to do the work he has been called to do -- and trusts the consequences to the God who has called him to do it.

Nevertheless. It's a great word. It's one we've heard used by the giants of justice of our own day (Looking at you Elizabeth Warren!) and by the ancient psalmists of Hebrew Scriptures. Throughout the generations, when faced with seemingly impossible obstacles – the response to the doomsayers and the handwringers, the naysayers and the bad-news-bringers is one version or the other of "Nevertheless ..."

- ... we will hope
- ... we will press on
- ... we will trust that our God will be with us in the struggle

And the struggle is real. Make no mistake about it my siblings in Christ, the struggle is real.

We gather this morning in the shadow of the breaking and heartbreaking news of the ongoing assault on the people of Ukraine in a world that teeters ever closer to the unimaginable devastation of global war.

We continue to inch our way out of the pandemic that still holds us and those we love in a kind of ongoing limbo of vulnerability – with too many beloved members of our families and communities now absent from us.

We cannot hide from the fact that our nation is increasingly polarized, our democracy is inarguably under threat, that liberty and justice for all remains a pledge we make rather than a reality we live.

There are still miles to go before we rest in the work of dismantling the systemic marginalization of LGBTQ people in our church, our nation and our world in general -- and in Florida and Texas in specific.

And we cannot deny that over it all looms the existential challenge of the climate crisis that threatens this fragile Earth, our island home.

Nevertheless, we persist. We persist because -- in the words of our brother Andre Henry -- it doesn't have to be this way.

And we persist because we stand on the shoulders of those who have persisted from generation to generation ... those whose stories we gather to tell and retell in this sacred space to remind ourselves and each other that we are not the first generation to struggle ... we are not the first people to fight the principalities and powers that get in the way of that kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven we pray for every time we gather ... we are not the first ones to cry out "How long, O Lord!" as Jesus did ... weeping over Jerusalem:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

You were not willing.

Not you were not called.

Not you were not equipped.

Not you were not able.

**You were not willing.**

The story of our unwillingness -- and the dogged "neverthelessness" of God's love for us anyway -- is arguably the plotline of the entire biblical story we inherit -- these sacred scriptures that are the family album of our spiritual ancestors.

Verna Dozier -- African American biblical scholar and 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet -- summed it up with these words in her seminal work "The Dream of God:"

*"The biblical story is one of a free God who created free creatures to be in fellowship with their Creator. The free creatures could not trust the divine way, and God, respecting their freedom, set in motion a plan to win them back."*

To win us back when we were not willing to be gathered into God's loving embrace.

To win us back when we were not willing to trust the dream of the God who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another.

To win us back by offering another possibility to "it doesn't have to be this way."

And yet, the struggle continues.

Hear again these words of Dr. Dozier from one of our lessons this morning:

*Jesus “announced that the kingdom of God had come with him and ... offered another possibility to humankind. But since it is another possibility that threatens the existing arrangements the existing arrangements will bend every effort to destroy it: to water it down with religion or threaten it with disloyalty.”*

When you “threaten the existing arrangements” the existing arrangements can and will do whatever it takes to destroy that threat.

The existing arrangement of White Supremacist Patriarchy will do whatever it takes to destroy the threat of sharing power with Black, Brown, Queer and Female people – including dismantling democracy and replacing it with oligarchy if necessary.

The existing arrangement of cisgender heteronormativity will do whatever it takes to destroy the challenge of transgender and non-binary people seeking to speak their own truth and live their own experience of gender identity – a challenge we see in sharp relief in the onslaught of anti-trans and “don’t say gay” legislation across our nation.

The existing arrangement within the church of what Mike called the “temptation industrial complex” designed to keep people conveniently & perpetually in need of a forgiveness that only the church can provide will do whatever it can to hold onto its power by marginalizing and dismissing theologies and narratives that challenge it.

And the existing arrangement of Church-aligned-with-Empire will literally do whatever it takes to destroy any threat to its power – as we have seen in our nation in the support for the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection by a huge percentage of White Evangelicals and on the world stage in the words of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill -- who this week sent a strong signal justifying his country’s invasion of Ukraine: describing the conflict as part of a struggle against sin and pressure from liberal foreigners to hold “gay parades” as the price of admission to their ranks.

Another “How long, Oh Lord” moment for members of the LGBTQ+ community: Routinely blamed for everything from hurricanes to tornados to earthquakes ... and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine is our fault, too.

Nevertheless, we persist. In the words of Sister Joan Chittister I’ve offered many times from this pulpit: “We are each called to go through life reclaiming the planet an inch at a time until the Garden of Eden grows green again.”

An inch at a time. A prayer at a time. A letter to Congress at a time. A prayer shawl at a time. A City Council resolution at a time. A Sunday School art project at a time. A protest at a time.

There are as many ways at a time as there are inches at a time — and each and every one of them is how we as the people of God ... answer Verna Dozier's question in her Agenda for the 90's ... "What would it look like to actually follow Jesus?"

If we've been listening to the Gospels appointed for the last few weeks we know something about where that following leads. It leads to proclaiming liberation to the captive, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

It leads to speaking truth to those in power — even when speaking that truth might get you thrown off a cliff by your own hometown crowd.

It leads to turning upside down the values of the world and replacing them with the values of the kingdom of God ... where the blessed are not those with power, privilege and possessions but those who are poor, those who weep and those who hunger.

And it leads to what is perhaps the greatest challenge of all: refusing to settle for how far we've come and continuing to be open to where God is calling us to go.

Of all the words from Verna Dozier which have inspired and challenged me over the years, it may be these words about faith and fear that I have turned to more times than any other — especially whenever it's time to once more step out into new beginnings, new challenges, new opportunities.

*"Doubt" said Verna, "is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today."*

Freedom from the fear of risking because we might be wrong frees us to get it right — by opening new doors, challenging old assumptions, chancing new undertakings.

In every moment something sacred is at stake — and on this Second Sunday in Lent in the Year of our Lord 2022 there is an urgent need for new possibilities we cannot even imagine today to overcome the very real challenges facing the world we live in today: war-torn, terror-wracked, polarized and demoralized we are constantly bombarded by efforts to feed our fears as part of a strategic plan to keep us polarized and demoralized — and therefore immobilized.

And one of the most effective ways to resist that fear — to refuse to be immobilized — is to remind ourselves of those voices of witness to the power of God's love to transform even the fear in our hearts into strength for the journey — voices like Verna's who remind us about our history in order to empower us for our future: voices that comfort us in our affliction and afflict us in our comfort ... voices that call us to continue to ask of ourselves and each other: "What would it mean to actually follow Jesus?" as we work together to make the dream come true.

*A world in need now summons us  
to labor, love and give.  
To make our life an offering  
to God that all may live,  
The church of Christ is calling us  
to make the dream come true.  
A world redeemed by Christ-like love  
All life in Christ made new. Amen.*