

Gather at the River
Sunday, May 29, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

OK, everybody take a deep breath.

And let it out.

Let's try that again.

Everybody take a deep breath.

Let it out.

God is here.

God is here.

And that means right here, right now, in the middle of everything that has happened this past week, in the middle of everything that is happening all around us as we gather, for this moment, right now, we can take a deep breath,

and let it out.

And feel the presence of God.

OK?

I have to say this is one of these weeks where I feel I am supposed to bring a message of hope at a time when that well is running a little dry for me. We seem to be at the same place again and again and again with guns in this country. And while we can agree that thoughts and prayers aren't enough ... we are at a point where anything else we do seems equally as powerless to keep this from happening again and again and again.

So, I began to think about other seemingly intractable situations in the world, and my mind went back to eight years ago this month, when I spent a couple weeks in Israel and Palestine listening deeply to people on all sides of that conflict.

I left changed by three profound experiences.

The first was sitting separately with young Palestinian activists and then with members of the Israeli Defense Force. And as I listened deeply to each, I realized I had heard their words before.

The IDF officers talked about the Palestinians using the same words I had heard the police officers I knew in St. Louis use – talk of fear of replacement ... of a “them” taking over ... a “them” that the officers of both forces seemed increasingly challenged to see the humanity in.

And the young Palestinian activists were saying the same things the young black people I was beginning to know in north St. Louis said – words of anger at generations of oppression ... and a demand simply to be seen as human beings.

The parallel was driven home three months later after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson when the St. Louis County police shot the very same brand and model tear gas canisters at the young black protesters that the IDF shot at the Palestinians ... all made by an American company, that’s important ... and some of the same activists I sat with in the Dheisheh refugee camp used Twitter to tell their black siblings in the United States how to make eyewash to counteract the tear gas’s effects.

What I began to realize in those moments, both in Dheisheh and in Ferguson was that while context is critical to understanding instances of oppression and conflict, the dynamics are almost always the same.

We dehumanize each other when property becomes more important than people. When accumulating wealth and power becomes more important to us than seeing each other’s humanity

... more important than the simple declarative statements that govern this community of All Saints Church ... that whoever you are that you are welcome here ... that whoever you are that God dwells in you.

55 years ago this summer, Dr. King gave a speech to the National Conference on New Politics where he identified what he called the Three Evils of Society – racism, economic exploitation and militarism.

The truth he told in that speech was nothing new then, and it is alive and well now. Whether capitalism is the delivery system for white supremacy or white supremacy is the delivery system for capitalism the results are the same.

And militarism? Besides the fact that it’s the black and brown kids who die first and most often in just about any conflict, I learned all I had to know about war the night the first Gulf War started. I was working the sports desk at the Daily Tribune in Columbia, Missouri, while CNN blared on the black and white TV perched on the sports department’s file cabinet. John Schneller, the city editor, wandered in, looked at the TV ... said three words and walked out.

The three words?

Good.

For.
Business.

Why did we invade Iraq and Afghanistan?

Good for business.

Why are our leaders and way too many of the rest of us outwardly aghast but secretly smiling about the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Good for business.

Why did we kidnap black bodies from Africa and torture labor out of them?

Good for business.

Why did we kill and evict indigenous people from this land then take the resources from the lands we left them with and then kill and evict them again when they try to come back to their ancestral homes even to be this nation's subsistence laborers?

Good for business.

Why do we support Palestinian apartheid in Israel and invest in an increasingly militarized police presence and things like shotspotter in Northwest Pasadena?

Good for business.

Why did Jesus end up on the cross for preaching liberation and why were his story and teachings co-opted into a global religious industrial complex that stands for just about everything Jesus came to liberate the world from?

Good for business.

Why is our immediate response to the massacre of fourth graders absolute conviction that our elected officials will do nothing to prevent this from happening again and again and again?

Not because we think that guns are good.
Not because we think guns are our God given right
But because we know that guns are
Good.
For.
Business.

We are not too divided in this country.

That is a lie that is fed to us.
A lie that also, by the way, is good for business.

We are not too divided.
We are too united.

United in our love for property over people and money and power over honoring each other's basic humanity.

United in our reticence to risk even the little we might have for the sake of a transformed and transforming world.

United in our seduction by those three evils of society of racism, economic exploitation and militarism and on this Memorial Day weekend united in our willingness to use the sacrifice of those who join the military out of patriotism or economic compulsion to further not the defense of freedom but our own nation's thirst for wealth and power.

United in our worship of that which keeps us enslaved to the way things are. The status quo.
Because the status quo is

good for business.

OK, everybody take a deep breath.

And let it out.

Let's try that again.

Everybody take a deep breath.

Let it out.

God is here.

God is here.

For this moment, right now, we can take a deep breath,

and let it out.

And feel the presence of God.

Second experience.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is Christianity's holiest site. It is built over the spots where since the second century, tradition has held that Jesus was crucified and died, his body anointed and buried, and from where, tradition has it, he rose again.

For nearly two thousand years, millions of pilgrims have visited the Church. It has been torn down and burned, only to be rebuilt and torn down and burned and rebuilt again. During the Crusades, it was a place thousands killed and died for.

Even in recent centuries, which Christian group controls this holy site has been a matter of intense conflict. For most of the past 200 years, three primary groups have shared custody of the Church – the Orthodox, represented by the Greeks, the Armenian Apostolics and the Roman Catholics, represented by Franciscan monks.

This shared custody is governed by an intricate set of rules also called – interestingly enough – the status quo. It regulates everything that happens in the common areas including the chapels of Jesus' tomb. The status quo is so exacting, you can't move a candlestick a millimeter without getting consent from all the communities.

The diverse custodians of the church take this law incredibly seriously. Nearly 20 years ago, when the Orthodox were having one of their liturgies, the door to the Franciscan Chapel was left open when it was supposed to be closed. The Orthodox took this as a sign of disrespect, and a fistfight broke out. For leaving a door open.

That's how tightly controlled life inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is. And my first reaction to it was sadness. Sadness that these groups of deeply faithful people, each dedicating their life to Christ -- albeit in radically different ways -- can't just get along.

Yet here's the thing. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is also a place of some of the deepest grace I have ever experienced.

On one of my last nights in Jerusalem, three of my fellow pilgrims and I entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at nine pm and watched from the inside as the door was closed and locked behind us, sealing us and eight others in until five the next morning. A tradition generations old of 12 random pilgrims getting to spend the night each night in this holy space. Even if one of us had had a heart attack or a stroke, that door would not be opened until 5 am.

As the sound of the door closing echoed throughout this now-empty space, a Franciscan monk gathered us around and said quietly:

There are three rules: No singing. No sleeping. No candles.

Then he lifted his head and said with a gentle smile:

"The church is yours."

Think about that. In one of the most tightly controlled spaces in Christendom, where leaving a door open can trigger a fistfight, 12 total strangers were invited in and told words that the factions of the status quo could never say to one another:

“The church is yours.”

There was no vetting procedure to spend the night there. We didn’t even get Googled. How could they? They never even asked our names! We just showed up early that morning at the Franciscan sacristy and said, “we are four pilgrims, and we would like to spend the night in the Church.” And the brother looked at us and said, “OK. Come back before 9 tonight. I’ll remember you.”

I had a backpack on when I walked into that church. It had some water and a sweatshirt and various devotional items, but for all anyone knew it could have had explosives or cans of spray paint or even a fifth of scotch for a late night bender at the foot of the cross. They never checked. They never even asked.

In this place governed for centuries by intricate and severe laws that you break at the peril of international ecclesiastical incidents, we were the beneficiaries of deep and radical grace. And because of it that night, those of us who were there had an experience of Christ that at least in my life is unparalleled in its depth and power.

No singing. No sleeping. No candles.

The church is yours.

I talked with one of the brothers and asked him if the church had ever been vandalized or anyone had ever been injured by one of the overnight pilgrims. He said as far as he knew, it had never happened.

The status quo seems incredibly powerful.

The status quo seems intractable and unchangeable.

And yet in the midst of the status quo, there can be and there are transformative moments.

Moments of grace.

Moments of love.

Moments of power.

Those moments are real.

They do not change the status quo ... not individually and not yet.

And yet they are no less real and no less transformative.

They are not about changing the realities of the status quo.

They are about how we face the realities of the status quo.

One of the great religious scriptures of humanity is the Bhagavad Gita. It is a conversation between Arjuna, a human warrior, and Krishna, an incarnation of the divine. A conversation between humanity and God ... and it takes place on a battlefield - the senseless likes of which we all know all too well.

Krishna tells Arjuna to focus on three things – knowledge, action and love. War will always be with us – at least for now. There will always be deep pain and deep grief - at least for now. And in the midst of it, what we can do is three things:

Seek truth.

Speak truth and live truthfully without attachment to the outcome.

Let the love that is God flow into you and through you.

Knowledge. Action. Love.

The status quo seems incredibly powerful.

The status quo seems intractable and unchangeable.

And yet in the midst of the status quo, there can be and there are transformative moments.

Moments of grace.

Moments of love.

Moments of power.

We create those moments.

We become those moments.

We are transformed in these moments if together we can

Seek truth.

Speak truth and live truthfully without attachment to the outcome.

Let the love that is God flow into us and through us

If we can take a deep breath.

And let it out.

And remember...

God is here.

God is here.

Take a deep breath,

and let it out.

And feel the presence of God.

Final experience.

The Western Wall, or the Buraq Wall, as our Muslim siblings call it, is an ancient holy site for all three Abrahamic faiths.

Built as part of the expansion of the second temple during the reign of Herod the Great, many Muslims believe it is the site where the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, tied his winged steed, al-Buraq, on his journey to Jerusalem before ascending to paradise.

For Jews, it has for centuries been a spot of deep lamentation over the destruction of both of the temples. In recent generations it has become a place where the faithful of many faiths have come to pray and lament.

I had heard about the Western Wall ... or the Wailing Wall ... as it is sometimes known for most of my life. And yet my companions and I stumbled on it almost by accident as we were exploring Jerusalem one night.

I put on a kippah as we split up – the women going to their area and the men to ours. I was not expecting to be there that night so I hadn't prepared myself or even thought about what this might be like. And, I recognized that I was in a holy space that was not of my own faith so I approached the wall slowly as a pilgrim hoping to pay respects to an honored friend rather than a traveler who was at last coming home.

What happened next was one of the more unexpected and remarkable experiences of my life.

As I approached the wall, I can't describe it any other way than that I felt a power emanating from it.

Now I need to stress that though I was raised in mystical traditions I most often have the heart of a skeptic about things like this, convinced my mind is playing tricks on me. And so that's what I figured it was until I closed my eyes, reached out and touched the wall and felt a jolt unlike anything I had ever felt.

The nearest I can come to describing it is saying that when I touched the wall, I felt like a river of pain was flowing around me and through me. And yet though it was overwhelming, it was not scary because the pain was so deeply intertwined with love. I felt all the pain of my life, all the pain of everyone else that I was carrying, all the pain I knew becoming one with this river.

I don't know how long it lasted. I know for a moment at least, I stopped breathing. I didn't cry because it was far deeper than tears. More than anything it was holy. It was the closest I have come to feeling the very presence of God.

It was a river of pain.
It was a river of love.
And the two were the same.

Not in the way that love and pain sometimes get mixed in an abusive situation, but love holding the pain, sitting with the pain, saying “you will never be alone in your pain.”

The love did not make the pain go away.
And I did not have to ignore the pain to feel the love.
Both were there. Nothing was lost.

Finally, I took a deep breath ... and just felt the presence of God.

A few weeks ago, I was at a preaching conference in Denver and heard a lecture from the Rev. Otis Moss III, one of the most inspired and gifted preachers in this country.

He talked about the law of conservation of energy. Now the law of conservation of energy states that energy can dissipate and energy can be converted into different forms but energy can never be lost. Never.

And he said what this means is that the sound waves from every word Jesus of Nazareth ever said are still floating around us in some form. Now his point for us preachers was whenever we happen to get it right in our preaching it wasn't so much because of us but because we just happened to bump into one of those words of Jesus floating around and it gets stuck in us in a way we are able to amplify it for others.

And ... what Dr. Moss reminded me of is the truth I experienced that night at the Western Wall. The truth that is expressed in our reading from Revelation this morning. The truth I cling to in days and weeks and years such as this.

Nothing is lost.

Nothing is lost.

Our reading from Revelation this morning is from the very end of the book ... the very end of our canon of scripture. The portion we heard and the verses before it describe a heavenly city with a tree of life and a river running through it. The tree is the tree of life that was there at the beginning in the poetry of Eden ... and the poet says the “leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

The city is all human endeavor. Everything we have tried and succeeded. Everything we have tried and failed. And most of what we have done that defies that facile categorization.

And then there is the river. I am convinced that river is what I touched that night at that Wall.

It is the river of pain and love.

It is the river of all the children's cries.

It is the river of the arms that ache to hug just one more time.

It is the river of the lives that should have been.

It is the river flowing over a way that with tears has been watered.

It is the river through which we have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.

It is the river of all our efforts that seem like they amounted to nothing.

The river of all the sweat poured out of us as we cried, "how long, O Lord?"

It is the river that feeds the tree with leaves of healing.

It is the river from which all creation drinks ... the river in whose water the divine stands and says, "Come." Everyone who hears it answers, "Come."

The river of tears and love to which everyone gives and from which everyone drinks and in which everyone – no exceptions, no exclusions, no ifs, ands or buts, - the river in which everyone's pain is received and baptized in the infinite healing love of God.

Take a breath, dear ones. And let it out.

Cry the tears you need to cry.

Rage the anger you need to rage.

The forces of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are ancient foes, and they are showing no signs of waning.

And yet though it might seem to be so, this status quo of good for business is not invincible.

There are moments of grace.

Moments of love.

Moments of power.

We create those moments.

We become those moments.

We are transformed in these moments if together we can

Seek truth.

Speak truth and live truthfully without attachment to the outcome.

Let the love that is God flow into you and through you.

And there is a river.

A river of love.

A river of pain.

A river that binds us together.

A river that feeds a tree of life with leaves of healing.

A river at which we gather this morning in hope

Where our pain meets God's pain.

And our love meets God's love.

And we know we can for one more day put one foot in front of the other, holding each other up
along the way.

For one more day we can take a deep breath.

And let it out.

And take another deep breath.

And feel the presence of God. Amen.