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Covenant Federated Church of Kentland
Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – November 18, 2007

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Tanakh Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm Reading: Isaiah 12:1-6
Epistle Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Gospel Reading: Luke 21:5-19

A Peace Beyond All Understanding

This week I have been rifling through a lot of second and third century Christian texts in preparations for the upcoming semester at Saint Joseph's College. I teach in the Core program, a type of humanities class, that takes the semester to examine the Christian impact on the western world starting with its roots and going all the way to the Reformation in Europe. One of the texts I happened upon was that of a noblewoman named Vibia Perpetua, her slave Felicity and a presbyter named Saturus. It is a collection of documents with Perpetua's narrative being the most prominent. It is a very rare type of document in that it is actually a first person account written by a woman, one of the few surviving from the first millennium of Christianity.¹ In these stories, I was treated to the struggles of early Christians being thrown in prison awaiting a trial, being convicted of Christianity and sentenced to death by wild beasts. More than that, these are stories of peace and joy. These early Christians find joy in being fed to the wild animals. They find peace in their sentence and the time in prison before their execution. One woman, Felicity, even prays that her child be born prematurely so that she can be executed with all of the other Christians. The Romans were nice enough not to execute pregnant women. Felicity's prayer is answered and both women are allowed to fight for their lives against bears, leopards, and wild boars.

¹ John Coakley & Andrea Sterk, ed., *Readings in World Christian History, Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 30-37.

As I was reading these stories, I kept asking myself if I would have the same type of peace and joy in my faith. Would I find joy and I mean real joy in a death sentence? Would I walk in peace while waiting in prison? That led me to another question. If I wouldn't have such peace, what is holding me back from that peace? What am I holding onto from my past that keeps me from the peace promised to us in Christ? Now, when I'm talking about the peace of Christ, what I'm imagining is an internal happiness that is so rooted in who we are as a person that no circumstance around us can take away that happiness. We are so centered and in harmony with the grace and presence of God sustaining us that we no longer need to worry about finding happiness in the world around us.

Unfortunately, we are taught from a very young age that we should seek happiness in situations and things. We equate our lives to a random string of moments and possessions. We build up for ourselves stories of grand designs and augment them with physical materials of equal magnificence. Sometimes our stories go sour yet we cling to these moments and things all the more. But if we look at anyone's life or even our own as a series of moments, there are good times and bad times. The happiness we seek in our situations and things seem to wax and wane over a lifetime. We discover the lie our western world has told us that our possessions and individuality will make us happy. We discover we are like chaff or marshmallow fluff. We are a lot of experience but not a lot of substance. We have a lot of means to happiness in our riches and lives of seeking but we have no deep-rooted happiness. The question is: if you take away all of my things and all of my experiences, if you strip me naked to my very core, what type of

person do you have left? Is he or she really happy? Are they at peace with who they are?²

This is the question that our readings for today answer for us. In our Isaiah and Gospel reading for today we are confronted with the death of the old and birth of a new thing that God has created. Isaiah speaks of the wonderful restoration of the people of Israel when they return from the exile in Babylon. God is creating an incorruptible joy that lasts forever, an unshakable happiness at the center of all things in Jerusalem. This is a peace from God's grace at the core of whom Israel is. With that peace in mind, we find the setting for our Gospel story. In the middle of the *pax romana*, and near the finishing stages of the rebuilding of the Jewish temple that was started by Herod in 20BCE. The Romans had brought peace to the land of Israel and had actually provided the means for the Hebrew people to rebuild the temple on a grand scale. Everyone marveled at the magnificence of the dwelling place of God on Earth. Jesus is not impressed.

Jesus reveals to us the deeper meaning of our Isaiah passage as he reflects with the crowd upon this glorious temple and apparent peace. We read in our Gospel of all the horrible trials that the Christians of that time would need to endure. Christ even says that some of those standing around him would be put to death in the future to come. Then he says something quite strange in the very next sentence, "But not a hair on your head will perish." How is this possible? What Jesus is telling us is that we have been misinterpreting what it means to have peace and happiness from God. He reveals that what Isaiah was talking about and what he himself is talking about is that true peace that is

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, WD Ross, trans., (New York: Clarendon Press, 1908).

without flaw or corruption will be found within the self. This peace and joy will spring forth from a new temple that Christ himself will build and it will be built within the very hearts and minds of the people of earth.

This happiness is able to withstand all that the world throws at it and as Jesus tells us it will not perish. We shall rejoice from our very core as Isaiah tells us. In each case the way to gain this peace is by letting go of the old ways in which we have sought out peace. The temple must be destroyed even though it had just been finished. Jerusalem had to be destroyed and created new for the Hebrews to return from exile. We must let go of all the old destruction in our lives. We must get rid of all the guilt we hold on to and make way for the new peace that Christ is building in us.

More than that Paul tells us in our Epistle reading for today what else we must do to gain this peace. We have to work for it. Christ without question has justified us before God for our sins but we must still work for our sanctification in this life and that's what Paul instructs us to do. We are warned not to sit in idleness thinking we have been saved and so we don't need to work because Jesus is coming soon. We must strive to bring the peace that we seek to reveal within our selves into the world around us. We must work at making manifest the kingdom of God that resides within our souls.

We can do this by seeking God in all of our actions. We must avoid gluttony and neglect in all that we do. Finding a balance between the two at a point theologians like to call perfect virtue. We can use the reason God has given us to discern what the path is that leads to the internal peace that is within us. When we find this peace, we find that we can have many of the things and experiences that we once had around us but they no longer define who we are or are no longer a means to happiness for us but rather they are

a means to manifesting God's grace in the world around us. Who knows, we may yet find joy in life despite being fed to lions.