

James 1: 22ff.

John 16: 23-33

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

If you have ever been around small children, one reality will quickly become apparent, and that is the fact they are constantly in motion unless asleep!! Sometimes they appear to practice astral projection because you can spot them, turn around to get a cup of coffee, turn back around only to discover they are out of site. (And usually out of ear range judging their response to being called back.) We, too, are rapidly and continually in movement during this season of the church year, if not physically, certainly emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We have been on an arcing trajectory; from death and suffering (Lent) to resurrection (Easter); from resurrection and presence toward absence (Ascension); and will transition from absence to the promise of eternal connection with the one we call ‘Messiah’ (Pentecost). It seems that the life of faith is a life marked by motion, challenging activity, and persistent tensions.

We complete today what we began 2 weeks ago in St. John, and he gives us metaphor after image with striking ironies and language. We have going and coming, grief and joy, asking (2 differing verbs and that is a whole sermon itself) and receiving, seeing and not seeing, parables with hidden language and open speech, faith and unbelief, the world and God, and finally today tribulation and courage to envision freedom. On one hand this is daunting, if not confusing, yet on the other, a statement of what it means to try and live, with all that word implies, as a Christian in THIS world; in this time and space. “In this world you have tribulation. BUT be of good courage, I have overcome the world.” So we are beckoned to live within the ambiguity that is part and parcel of a life of faith with a keen focus on the **‘I’** who speaks to us and for us!!

In 1969 Hollywood gave us a Western movie filled with unforgettable characters and yet standard plot. The players ranged from the sublime (Robert Duval) to the ridiculous (Glen Campbell), to one trick actors with the inimitable John Wayne tucked squarely in the middle. The movie was titled, “True Grit”, introduced us to an amusing but potent curmudgeon carrying the name U.S. Marshal, Rooster Cogburn. He drank too much, wore a patch over one eye, and his best friend was a mangy cat called General Lee. Even with his ample multitude of character flaws, one redeeming factor stood out and that was his consistent faithfulness. In the high point of the movie, Rooster confronts his nemesis, the murderer, Ned Pepper, played by Duval, on a remote high desert plain and promptly says, “Ned, I intend to arrest you and take you back to Judge Parker to be hung at his convenience, or shoot you here; which will it be?” Ned, backed by 3 accomplices, quickly replies, “Those are mighty bold words coming from a one eyed fat man”!! John Wayne takes some umbrage at the description and the battle is waged. The phrase however stands out--Mighty Bold Words.

The Gospel appointed for today is similarly filled with some words writ large and bold. Listen to them. “In this world you have tribulation; but be of good courage, I have conquered the world”. Really? These are uttered by a man ultimately facing arrest, scourging, trial, and crucifixion at the hands of one of the most powerful and brutal regimes in history!! His words stand out precisely because they are in contrast with the apparent reality around him. “In this world you have tribulation”—yes, that fits and makes sense does it not? We understand that quite well. It is the second half that pushes credibility and takes us to a new place. Those are the truly BOLD words.

SERMON – THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER – 6 MAY 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D

So we live with an astounding tension which marks the boundaries of our life in faith. For me, at least, all of this is present.

Tribulation can be heard as an external set of forces that inflict themselves on us. It may be the distress of physical decline, the alterations in our ability to navigate as once we did, or the pressures of trying to live a life of faith in a world that not only fails to support such efforts, but in fact demurs and is hostile to such commitments. “The World” in John is not creation itself, but a context and situation that simply fails and is unwilling to see God as the center of life and giver of hope. It is life collapsed in on itself. “In this world you have tribulation” is at times less a description of something ‘out there’ than it is a state of life ‘in’ my own soul. When I look at the paucity of my own faith, and the times when my prayer is not only weak, but that I do not even want to pray due to doubt or the interference of other desires, I am aware of tribulation, not external, but deep in my own life. When fear of the future clouds the vision of God’s presence and promise, it is tribulation. When John reports Jesus saying, “indeed, you will scatter to your own (homes-places) it is a reminder of how easily our struggles can take over the whole of our horizons and look as if nothing else exists or matters. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, prostitution, classes, empires—is the long terrible story of humanity trying to find something other than God which will make us happy”. To be scattered is to refuse to believe at a visceral, core level, and not merely intellectual, that God is the object of our most enduring joy. How easy it is to be dissuaded by our own doubts or hurts that someone other than God ultimately matters!! As I wrote this I was surrounded by the news that a good friend has been diagnosed with rapidly encroaching terminal illness, and that mother has advancing dementia. That clouds the horizon of life and the words, “In this world you have tribulation”, seem a bit too real.

But those are not the FINAL words here. What remains in the texture and contrast is this—in light of the trials and struggles, the disappointments and overwhelming encounters is really just one word. No, it is not “be of good courage”. We are not called to a stiff upper lip or to pretend we have a faith that drives away doubt or anxiety... The central word in the text is ‘I’. We are invited to have courage not in our own faith (have faith in your faith, it’s very therapeutic), but in the Christ who overcomes by coming into the world with all its resistance, rejection, doubt, or suffering—the very places we live and that cause our withdrawal and scattering and taking it into himself. There is encouragement found that even this far along in their relationship with Jesus, the disciples are still as short-sighted as any of us, yet they are the carriers of the faith. We are called to see that these words of Jesus were experienced by the early Church as a flashback viewed from the resurrection and represent the defeat of abandonment, death, fear, and tribulation. The outcome is already decided even if the battle goes on.

The Christian Faith is not a place of passivity and quietude waiting for a world to come; it is an active, often ambiguous set of contrasts that asks us to throw ourselves on the resurrection and the light and the shadow in which all life experiences can be seen. This entire text is predicated on just that; the resurrection which is the seal of the love of the Father for the Father’s own children. Recall that is where all this dialogue begins, and it is where it all ends as well.

There are 2 pieces of art to which I want to call your attention. The first you have undoubtedly seen. It is Da Vinci’s “Last Supper” and is familiar. The other was on the front of our bulletin a

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few weeks ago, and it is the “Resurrection” segment of the Isenheim Altar by Matthias Grunwald, which shows Jesus raised and the guards prone as dead men before him. There is an interesting artistic device that both painters used to create these masterpieces. If you draw the lines of perspective over these paintings they converge at one point; on Jesus. All the other figures, even though they are important to the message, are tertiary. It is as if the artists are telling us the secret of life in the midst of all other things, all other relationships, all other challenges (betray and death) is to be found in the one who promises that we can take heart for he has overcome all that can ultimately harm us. The Central Word (pun intended) in our gospel today is “**I**”, “love one another as **I** have loved you; **I** no longer call you servants but friends; **I** am not alone, **I** have overcome. The motion of this Easter season is the activity of Christ who is the truest image of God, and the truest image of what faithful humanity looks like. Amen+