

Normally we don't think of Jesus as a trouble-maker. This Gospel reading certainly makes it clear that Jesus wanted to make a difference in his world! He was aware of carrying a mission, God's mission, into this world; making it come alive in concrete acts and relationships. [As I grew up I remember hearing some people described as Straight talkers. That meant you could count on hearing "the way it is" - at least from that point of view.]

It turns out Jesus was continuing in a long tradition of Plain Talk. Patriarchs, Judges, and Prophets all put before their various audiences messages of judgment and concern, calls for decision - backed up by engagement. Today's readings bear that out.

Isaiah presents a love poem with the prophet speaking for the disappointed lover cast aside after carefully preparing a place. That lover is our Creator God; the God who worked to produce an environment that would foster recognition of God and thanksgiving for the provision of all of life. That is the Creator that commissioned **us** to live in harmony with one another from the very beginning. That voice shifts. We hear judgment against Israel for her failure to receive fully the gift of creation; to recognize God's efforts and act in accordance with God's will.

The Psalmist echoes the prophet calling upon God in lament; pleading with God as Shepherd of a beloved flock; calling on God to remember the care and tenderness employed in producing this beautiful world; raising the question of whether God will allow it to self-destruct or simply wipe it out. The Psalmist begs God to take Israel by the hand once again; to lead it back to God's intended way.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wants to make sure that everyone understands a life of discipleship isn't easy. Suffering accompanies faithful living as God's people. The promises made to the Patriarchs were not fulfilled immediately. Their **faith** was approved, and tested, and blessed by God. They were led forward and strengthened to continue as ones belonging to God.

The image of a race - a marathon - is presented. Yes, runners get tired. They need those breaks. The crowds, the saints of previous ages, cheering them on are essential for keeping their spirits up. They must not delay, but press on to the completion of the race.

**We like** to think of a life of faith as pleasant: getting along with everyone, doing good deeds, caring for others and our world, acting as responsible citizens of nation and kingdom.

What is Jesus talking about --- bringing division among families and fire upon earth? That isn't affirmation of our way of life! It sounds more like total destruction! Actually Jesus is really caring for those who would follow his way. Jesus intends for all to know that there are costs to being his disciples.

Disciples will not always be well-received. They may be tortured, laughed at,

ignored, even run out of town. Jesus wants us to know that following him is a significant decision.

These Scriptures are all about making BIG DECISIONS! They are about becoming ever more focused on living as God's people. They urge us to claim our roots and build on them; to become ever more faithful in our witness to God's will for this creation. Those roots include speaking out, in lament and protest. They include standing with the downtrodden and dispossessed. They include forthright profession of faith as driver of our behavior.

This is not a race with a single winner. There are no gold, silver or bronze medals to be awarded. This is the race of a community; a race in which everyone finishes and everyone wins. It calls for everyone to be engaged, ready to run. This race requires collaboration: each person sharing knowledge and experience to chart the way, oversee the training and fitness, provide for the water breaks and rest stops, encourage the runners to persevere knowing they will be greeted and celebrated at the finish line.

This congregation has chosen to join the race. We sense a call to become a different sort of church, continuing to serve this community and give glory to God in worship and service. Every insight gained, each experience of service, all creative abilities are needed and necessary. The decisions to be made are about choosing how and where you will be engaged. This calls for self-examination: naming those gifts and abilities for which you are known, admitting your hidden talents and offering to share, learning a new skill, participating in different styles of worship, reaching out in and to new mission endeavors.

There is room for all. Major support will come through the prayers lifted for strength and endurance as you live through continuing transition. You see, transition is really just another word for living life. Your choice today is to choose life as Christ's disciple in this place; to join with your sisters and brothers in faith to create and build up a fresh witness to Christ in this corner of the world.

Trust God's leading. Join the discovery of what God holds for you with open hearts and minds, giving thanks for God's presence and direction with you.

Amen