

“Hope to Become God’s Best”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
St. Francis’ Day – 7 & 8 October 2017  
Philippians 3:4b-14

It feels as if the world is coming apart at the seams. This cascade of events, raining down upon us relentlessly: the massacre in Las Vegas, yet another in a series of violent attacks that occur with increasing regularity; natural disasters, like the hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico, the Caribbean islands, Florida, Texas, and the earthquakes that struck Mexico twice; the fierce rage poisoning the thoughts and words and actions of so many with hate and paranoia. One might be tempted to wonder if the predictions are true that the world really will end on October 15<sup>th</sup>. It’s a ridiculous claim, but one that actually feels more appealing with all that’s been happening.

It brings to mind the William Butler Yeats poem, “The Second Coming,” written in 1919, just one year after the end of the World War I.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.”

This isn’t what we’d hoped to focus on this weekend. We wanted to enjoy the festival of St. Francis, a human icon of Christ-like love, a man who lived in harmony with nature, who sacrificed a comfortable life for the sake of simplicity, for real freedom and proper perspective. We wanted to honor and admire how Francis chose a radical path, wandering from place to place, preaching the Gospel to people in a way they could understand that led them to newness of

life. But how can we celebrate now, with our hearts heavy with fear and grief? It feels wrong to rejoice.

Yet we will rejoice, not because we seek an hour of escape or some superficial antidote to our pain, but because Christ offers us inspiration to rewrite the poem with our lives and make it read “the best are full of passionate intensity,” “the best possess conviction.”

We come to Christ hoping to receive grace that makes us daring and courageous, active agents of God’s peace and mercy. We come hoping for the strength to repent of sin and resist evil and bring others to repentance, to restore people and lands to right relationship with God and neighbor. We come with hope, because even as “things fall apart,” the center will hold, if our center is Jesus Christ.

But let’s not pretend that it will be easy. Grace can be a costly thing to harbor and share, and it is no substitute for hard work. Grace empowers us to sacrifice, to reprioritize, and to question long-cherished beliefs that may not conform to the love of Jesus. Grace is a force that compels us to confront cruelty and call out the lie of what some call the “new normal,” the lie that calls us to accept the unacceptable as inevitable.

Let’s listen to the words of Paul, a man driven by faith to take perilous journeys, much as St. Francis did. He rejected the respect he had earned by conforming to the norms. And with this new way of looking at life, Paul went where he was not welcome and spoke wisdom that most people labeled foolishness. And he accepted their ridicule gladly. To Paul, it was all part of being a disciple.

“For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,” he wrote the Philippians. To follow Jesus meant,

for Paul, to share in Christ's suffering, to bear a cross, to die to an old, ordinary, futile life for an extraordinary one full of meaning and purpose and imagination and joy.

Paul chose this way of life because God first chose him. Paul was lost and wanted to be found. "Christ Jesus has made me his own," he wrote, and that sense of belonging – in a world of enmity and alienation – gave Paul what he needed to endure the worst while holding on to his best convictions, "full of passionate intensity." And he changed the world.

Two-thousand years later, we're still reading what he wrote, learning from his words, being motivated by his witness. Did Paul ever expect that to happen? No. No sane person sits down, cracks their knuckles, and says, "Well, time to crank out some holy scripture that will last for millennia." He was telling the truth as best he knew how to help meet people's needs, and by God's grace, he managed to do it so well that generation after generation just kept on reading.

Of course, none of us can do anything like that, right? Probably not, but why be bothered? The future belongs to God, including our futures, but God gives us each present moment to use as best we can, "full of passionate intensity." How will we honor that gift, this precious moment, in a world of hurt that needs healing?

I think that's a useful question, and like any useful question, it only raises more. Each of us has been chosen, before the beginning of time, to receive grace to help others and glorify God. But do we accept being chosen, and choose God above all else? We are fond of owning things, and there's nothing inherently wrong with that, but are we prepared to be owned by Jesus, to belong to him as a possession to be used as he wishes?

What really motivates us? Is it power or popularity, or where we live, what we wear or drive? Are we driven by the need to be right all the time, to be protected from harm or at least

distracted from what threatens us? Or might we share, in measure, Paul's singular obsession? "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." Paul devoted the last thirty-some-odd years of his life to pursuing this purpose. Nothing else mattered to him, not even his life, which ended at the edge of a blade, because he refused to relent. That's a sacrifice few if any of us will be called to make for the sake of Jesus, but what will we sacrifice to serve as channels of God's peace, a peace so powerful it can change the world?

Are we ready to let go of cynicism, of complacency, of the false narrative that says, "Let somebody else handle it. I don't matter. There's nothing of importance I can do"? Are we ready to be inconvenienced, to make hard decisions about how we spend our time? Are we ready to stop avoiding the unavoidable and step into the chaos, and say, "No. Not on my watch. Jesus Christ is the center, and he will hold."?

Maybe it's time to curb our enthusiasm for self-righteous anger and put the "social" back into social media, which has become decidedly anti-social. What will you tweet or snapchat or email or post on Facebook this week that will help people know Christ and the power of his resurrection? Who are you going to help, and how? Simple acts of kindness are grossly underrated. A few gentle words can get a person through the day. But maybe there's something more, a commitment that might forge a relationship that might stake a claim to something you'd rather keep for yourself.

Explore your options. Each of us has more of them than we expect, because we are fueled by grace, and that never runs out. Prayerfully ask the God who owns you, the God to whom we all belong, to guide you and inspire you, to bring out your best. Because the worst is

full of passionate intensity, and at the moment, the worst is winning. But it cannot beat God, and when we the chosen choose to live in the love of Christ, we choose the winning side. Amen.