

***Life is messy.*** Can I get an “Amen”? (We don’t do that enough in the Episcopal Church! I mean the “Amen” part; we do “messy” pretty well, in spite of ourselves.)

To confirm the messiness of life, we simply need to read the headlines; or look at our own lives and our families; or talk to friends and neighbors. Messy does not mean bad necessarily. Sometimes it means confusing or out of our control. Messy can even be joyful and a sign of life—***our personal chaos sometimes allows for God’s Spirit to breakthrough and bring a new understanding of life and how we live.***

Life’s messiness is described in our assigned reading for this week from chapter 10 of *The Path*. As one member of our Thursday Bible study said this week, this chapter reminds her of some of the other chapters—the people stop listening to God, something bad happens, then God has to come in and rescue them from their mess. Her observation is pretty accurate throughout the Bible. Life happens and then we respond—either trusting in God or trying to do it all by ourselves.

One problem described in this chapter is when good leaders have bad sons. Like Eli before him, Samuel had two sons who were stinkers. They were taking bribes and perverting justice. Understandably the people do not want them to succeed Samuel as their leaders. ***Life is messy.*** Then the people compound that messiness by saying they want a king. They want to be like the other countries around them and have a strong leader who alone can fix what is wrong with their country. That is a common human impulse.

Now the problem with that very human response is that by having a king and becoming like other nations, the people of God give up what makes them special—having God as their king. Samuel as a man of God understood that. He prayed to God about this mess and the Lord told Samuel something surprising, “Listen to the voice of the people.” The Lord told Samuel not to take it personally—they are not rejecting him, but rejecting God. It is a remarkable exchange.

God goes on to say that the people are making a mistake. God told Samuel to detail all the reasons it will be bad for them—the king will tax them and draft them and tell them what to do whether they like it or not. But again the Lord repeated to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people.” Listen to them even when they are wrong.

Why do you think God told Samuel that? Well, first of all, it is always good for leaders to listen to the people—the leaders may learn something! And second, even if the people are profoundly wrong, God leads us by allowing us the freedom to fail. God’s plan is for us to learn from our failures and over time remember God’s way and return to it.

So Samuel told them what a king would be like—taxing them and drafting them and telling them what to do whether they like it or not. He did warn them. But then he listened to them and found a king for them. The rest of chapter ten in *The Path* lets us know how that turned out. In two words—“Not well.” Saul tried to do the right thing and sometimes he actually did. But too often his insecurity got in the way and the results were... messy.

I think it is fair to say that our world today is pretty messy, too. At times the parallels with the biblical stories are uncanny. Yet our story today is also different from ancient Israel's. Every time and place and people require their own response to the messiness of life. As followers of Jesus in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our response is still to be directed by our faith in the one that we call our king.

So how do we as followers of Jesus respond to the messiness of life today?

The first step when life is messy is to acknowledge it. It is unhealthy to ignore when life is messy. Or to try to cover it up. Or blame it on others. Or take all the blame ourselves and withdraw from our community. None of those responses will help us to connect to God and with one another so that we find the help we need when life is messy.

The second step is to face the messiness we know best—the messiness inside of us. At times we get so preoccupied with what's wrong in our world that we forget the mess in our own hearts. Now to do this will require some work. Advent is the perfect time to take it on.

We can do some simple things like shut out the noise of cable TV and talk radio and all those voices that seek to distract us from the Spirit. Instead take time for what the carol calls “silent stillness.” Pray. Ask God to help us see and hear—at least in part-- what God does. It will change our life.

After acknowledging the messiness of reality and taking time to connect with God, we are called to respond in ways that are healthy and right and faithful to our king. Jesus never taught us to worry or be afraid. Jesus never taught us to be angry or try to control other people. That is the opposite of our faith in Jesus and the love that he commands.

Instead, we are called to see life's messiness as God's raw materials. Life's mess is what God can help us use to create something special as a community. If we take that point of view, we can relax about trying to control the uncontrollable and trying to fix things our way. We can be open to God's way of loving—even loving our mess. That approach gives us freedom to be grateful for how life is; not distressed because it is not how we want it to be. That attitude allows us to enjoy God's blessings and simply love one another and do what we can do.

In this community of faith, we want to support and encourage one another to live this new way. We want to disengage from the powers of the world that try to control how we think and feel and behave. ***We should never let the powerful manipulate our fear and promote our anger so that we lose our faith.*** We are called as followers of Jesus to be different. We are called to see God's world—and our mess—through God's eyes.

So here are some things for us to remember as we live in this messy world:

Some people are caring for family members. Some are older, some are sick, some are addicted. As a family member giving care, I can tell you, it is hard sometimes to know what to do. ***Life is messy.*** What helps, I think, is to have people support you without judgment. Make meals. Drop notes. Offer help. Pray. Simply care. That does not make the messiness go away. But it brings a ray of hope to tough times that can help us find our way forward with God's help.

Some people have lost the basics of life. They are homeless. They are in prison. They do not know what to do. ***Life is messy.*** It helps for the rest of us to be aware of their plight. Look at them. Listen to them. Be there for them in practical ways. Pray for them and with them. We do that in this parish through Family Promise and through our ministry at the Children's Center at the women's prison in Alto, GA. We provide shelter and food and a caring heart. That really does matter. It gives people hope without us trying to fix them.

Some people have lost their way in life. They have so much—money, power, and prestige. Yet their lives are actually much messier than those of the poor or the sick or the imprisoned. They are disconnected from how most people in the world live. And though they seem to have everything, there is something missing. They know it, but can't imagine another way—God's way.

For example, I read the following two headlines in newspapers this past week:

- Aetna CEO in line for \$500 million payout (after merger with CVS) ~WSJ, 12/6/17
- Some prisoners wait months for (medical) tests, treatment in Georgia's prisons ~AJC, 12/8/17

On this Sunday in which we remember God's prophets, those are headlines that the prophets would decry. As followers of Jesus, we are called to pray and work to shine light and help bring changes to this type of unjust mess. Come talk with me if you want to help with this work.

So, life is messy. Amen? The good news is that God seems to like messes; or at least not be scared or frustrated by them in the same way we often are. During this season of Advent, let us take time to be aware and connect more closely with God, with our own hearts, and with one another as we move through the messiness of life. Amen.