

SERMON

STARTERS

Mary J. Scifres

May 19, 2002

Day of Pentecost

**Acts 2:1-21; Ps. 104:24-34; 35b;
1 Cor. 12:3b-13; Jn. 7:37-39**

LOVE IN ANY LANGUAGE

On Pentecost, the disciples gathered, waiting. God sent the Holy Spirit through wind and flame, giving the gift of understanding different languages. The Holy Spirit comes to us still, giving the gift of understanding through the language of faith.

Learning a new language is a difficult task. Language students are often seen carrying stacks of vocabulary cards or studying syntax to carry on a conversation in class. Learning a foreign language requires consistent study—tedious and boring sometimes, but exciting when the words seem to flow freely and fluently. The language of the Christian faith is a bit like that.

We diligently pursue our faith, but yearn for those precious moments when we experience the Holy Spirit in our midst. After such a moment, we go out like a mighty rush of wind ready to change our lives and spread the good news of God's love to the world. But the mighty wind can dwindle to an occasional gust all too easily. The



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“highs” are easily found at prayer vigils, retreats, conventions, concerts, meditation, or revivals. But, how do we live the language of faith on a daily basis? What index cards to we carry to spread God's gentle wind of love? What syntax do we use to share the flame of changed lives to those in need of God's transformation?

May 26, 2002

Trinity Sunday

**Gen. 1:1-2:4a; Mt. 28:16-20; Ps. 8;
2 Cor. 13:11-13**

DOMINATION OR DISCIPLESHIP?

In today's world, domination is a popular theme. Corporate takeovers, small business buyouts, political takeovers, Christian boasting, religious brow-beating, and institutional pride are all symptoms of the value humans place on domination.

Discipleship is not a popular theme. Despite public relations efforts to the contrary, businesses are in the business of making money and protecting their own self-interests. Despite lofty church goals, most Christians and churches are daily wooed into selfish pursuits and personal gain.

But the domination of Genesis 1:26 is a domination that requires discipleship at every step of the journey. To dominate the earth as God speaks of in creation's story is to care for the earth, to nurture its creatures, to sustain its population. To do so, we must be disciples, servants, caretakers, and stewards. Discipleship is a calling for all of God's peoples. Discipleship is a way of life that embraces service and care as God's representatives on this earth, not to protect our interests but to protect God's interests. And God's interest is vested in this world, a world that took such effort to create that God required

a whole day of rest after the hard work. At no time in Scripture does God require rest except when God creates and when Jesus heals or teaches. God's vested interests are clearly in such ventures, not in capital ventures or power struggles. As disciples of God, we are called to claim dominion over God's creatures through servanthood, not through domination.

June 2, 2002

1st Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 6:11-22, 7:24; 8:14-19; Ps. 46;
Rom. 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; (29-32);
Mt. 7:21-29**

FLOODS AND FOOLS OR WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

A pastor I know says he has “water problems.” Every parsonage and church he serves seems to encounter a flood, a leak, or a drain back-up. I find a certain irony in his decision to live in Seattle, where it rains more days than not. Lucky for him, electrical problems never seem to follow!

At first glance, it might seem that Noah had “water problems.” But Noah actually had “creation problems.” Or perhaps we should say that God had “creation problems.” The beautiful earth that God had created wasn't so beautiful once humans started dominating with selfishness and sin. Once such behaviors are unleashed, they seem to pour out in exponential proportions. Through the flood, God re-creates the world with hopes that a covenant of love can overcome the flood of selfish and sinful behaviors. With this covenant, God opens the floodgates of love that eventually culminate in the love of Christ Jesus on the cross. No matter how much sin and selfishness humanity can pour out on God's creation, God

finds a way to pour out even more love.

When we forget this message and think that our obedience to God's law, our perfect ethics or even our selfish pursuits can become the way to God, we become the fools who cry "Lord, Lord," from sinking sand. Standing on the message of God's love, we find solid ground, shelter from a storm, and a vehicle for taking Christ's love to the world.

June 9, 2002

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 12:1-9; Ps. 33:1-12;

Rom. 4:13-25; Mt. 9:9-13; 18-26

PEOPLE OF THE PROMISE

Abram and Sarai came from prominent and successful families. When they married, they would have had every reason to dream of the perfect marriage, the perfect family, the perfect life. But something happened that made it impossible for them to create these dreams: Sarai was barren. The dream ended there. She was the only wife of Abram, obviously much-loved. He was to carry on a great line of prominent leaders in his world. And yet, they could not bear a child. They were not capable of creating the world they desired.

Into that situation, a situation of no potential, a situation of barrenness and hopelessness, Yawheh God comes to promise ancestors, home, and blessing. What was God thinking?! God chose the least capable candidate for developing a nation, a monogamous man and his barren wife, and said, "You're it!" God chose the family absolutely incapable of being blessed and blessing others to be the People of the Promise. What was God doing?!

Here in only the 12th chapter of our entire Holy Bible, God changes the plan . . . God says, "No more do you human beings have to go it alone. I'm your Fellow Traveler now, and I can make anything happen."

That's what it means to be people of the promise. To accept this promise that God makes that we do not have to go it alone, that we are traveling with the Holiest of Holies, that God is in our midst, and therefore ANYTHING can happen.

June 16, 2002

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 18:1-15; Ps. 116:1-2, 12-19;

Rom. 5:1-8; Mt. 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

LAUGHTER AND LOVE

OR

AND SARAH LAUGHED

When old Sarah overheard God's plan to give her a birth child, she responded as any wise crone might . . . she laughed. She must have been well past her menopausal hormones to find laughter instead of tears. Sarah saw the irony in the situation: She, who had wanted nothing more than a child for decades, was finally receiving a concrete promise that she would bear that child in her old age. Most women would have cried from sorrow or cried out in anger, but Sarah laughed. What a wonderful response to the wild promises of God!

God calls us out of hopeless despair into the ridiculous world of God's promises. When we trust God and God's crazy love, we can honor the promise by accepting a new name as Sarah did. Our name is "Christian." Christians can revel in the promise that builds a community of faith and hope, working toward perfect love. No longer a stale, predictable church, our community of promise is an excited church that waits for the unexpected, participates in impossible dreams, and finds the promise of God beginning here and now. Our barrenness of distrust, injustice, fear, sorrow, loneliness is not the end of the story. The promise of new life springing forth from dry ground can produce the fruits of righteousness and justice, trust and faith, happiness and community. When we respond with laughter and hope to God's promise of new life, our barrenness is renamed hopefulness and God's loving promise is fulfilled.

June 23, 2002

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 21:8-21; Ps. 86:1-10, 16-17 or

Ps. 17; Rom. 6:1b-11; Mt. 10:24-39

WHEN THE PROMISE IS BETRAYED

Hagar's son was a part of God's promise to Abraham. But Sarah betrayed that

promise when she sent Hagar and her son away. This complex and tragic story is full of sorrow, even understandable in light of the pain that these two women must have felt. Nevertheless, Hagar was betrayed when she was cast out of Abraham's family . . . and seemingly away from God's promise.

Such is the case in much of life's journey. I remember the faithful wife who had to leave her beloved church when her ex-husband and his mistress-turned-second-wife came back to the church, becoming officers and choir members. There was the gentle man who lost his job in mid-life after building his small company into a major corporation. The pastor who gave countless hours to rebuild a dying church was asked to leave when a church leader decided the pastor had "lost her passion." Life is full of betrayed promises.

Hagar knew such a betrayal. But Hagar was wrong when she thought God would let her die in that wilderness. For God had not betrayed Hagar; God had not cast Hagar away from the promise. God surrounded Hagar and her child with love and comfort, sustaining them with the water of life and nurturing them with the promise of faithfulness.

Like Hagar, we are surrounded by God's faithfulness even when it seems that God's promises have been betrayed. For God's love is stronger than any betrayal and will sustain and nurture us through all of life's betrayals.

June 30, 2002

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 22:1-14; Ps. 13;

Rom. 6:12-23; Mt. 10:40-42

WHEN THE PROMISE IS THREATENED

Last year, when a depressed mother drowned her children, people were shocked and angry. Such deaths are so clearly threats to the promise of life that we are horrified when they occur. Equally horrific is today's scripture reading from Genesis. The demands attributed to God and Abraham's response of blind obedience are terrifying. Not only is a child facing a tragic and violent death at the hands of his father, but the very promise of God is threatened. It

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seems that a second flood might be in God's plan!

But God's plan is not destruction. . . God's plan is resurrection. Isaac was snatched from the jaws of death, and Abraham was snatched from the depths of despair. It is easy to assume that God demands destruction when we remember horrible acts of injustice like the September 11 tragedy. It is easy to assume that God is testing our faith when our lives are in shreds. But our assumptions are not God's will. If nothing else, this passage reminds us to be very careful when we think we hear God's call or know God's will. Communication with God is tricky business, and our ears may hear something very differently an hour or a day or a year later.

But in all things, God's promise is the common link, the steadfast thread that we can grasp when all else fails or the path seems hazy. Holding on to that promise of love and life is always our calling.

July 7, 2002

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67;

Ps. 45:10-17 or Ps. 72;

Rom. 7:15-25a; Mt. 11:16-19, 25-30

WOONG REBEKAH

A servant waits at the well for a drink of water. Knowing that the rare woman who would offer water to his camels would be the kind of rare jewel his master deserved, the servant meets this jewel in Rebekah. Before the servant could court Rebekah, she had surely wooed the servant with her generous hospitality.

This story is filled with both giving and receiving. Rebekah draws water for the servant; the servant showers her with jewels. Rebekah's parents give her their blessing; Rebekah gives Isaac her hand in marriage. Rebekah gives comfort to Isaac; soon Isaac will comfort Rebekah in her barrenness.

True love is one of mutuality. True Christianity is a faith of both giving and receiving. And yet, Christians struggle to find that mutuality. The church volunteer gives time and talents, but drives people crazy with her unwillingness to receive help. The church "pew potato" takes whatever is offered . . . church dinners, a

good sermon, beautiful music, children's activities, social events . . . but drives church leaders crazy at his ability to say "no" to every request for generosity.

One's relationship with God and one's relationships with the people of God's world should be filled with both giving and receiving. Jesus gave his life for humanity; Christians give our lives to Christ. God gave us a world of abundance; we can give this world and its people care and nurture. Then we build a faith of mutual love, like that of Isaac and Rebekah, giving and receiving in partnership. □

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