

**SERMON**  
**October 7, 2018**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

*For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." Isaiah 30*

*Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."  
And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10*

One of my earliest memories is of Hurricane Hazel. 1954. It was one of the deadliest and costliest hurricanes ever. 400 people were killed in Haiti before it struck the United States near the border of North and South Carolina as a category 4 hurricane. It came up the East Coast, up the Chesapeake Bay, right up the Severn River where I lived, causing 95 more deaths and then struck Canada raising the death toll another 81 people. Because of the deaths and damage caused by Hazel, its name was retired from use for North Atlantic hurricanes. What I particularly and personally remember is coming up out of our basement after a thunderous crash and simultaneous bright flash to see the electric light pole outside our house on fire and, hearing the terrifying howling of the storm. During the eye of the storm, we walked the beach road and saw a giant sea turtle that powerful currents had taken far from its usual habitat and stranded it on our roadway. In 1954 I was four years old.

I also remember another alarming event that happened that must have been at least a year earlier. At three, I remember being taken into the woods by my parents to be shown our new house (the same one that would provide us with shelter during Hurricane Hazel). There in the woods, with no other houses anywhere around, I was shown small wooden stakes planted in the dark brown forest floor and white string-lines connecting the stakes. It was the layout for the proposed new house, but that was not explained. I thought I was being shown "our new house." I was surprised that my mother seemed so happy. She showed me a tiny little area of dirt, staked and strung, and told me that this was my room. My room! Just trees and dirt. I was horrified. I didn't want to disappoint them but I just couldn't imagine staying there. What were they thinking? I was not able to imagine walls and a roof much less furniture and a bed—and the

wonderful little room I later had with black painted furniture and pink rosebuds. I just couldn't imagine. What I saw with my eyes was horrifying.

I want you to imagine for a moment that today's Gospel lesson which sounds so much like a legalistic prohibition about marriage and divorce, is not about strings and stakes, but is a *stark prophetic impatience* on the part of Jesus toward his disciples, and to us, who are only able to see the way things are and not the grand design and beauty of God's creation. For when we see only from our own limited perspective, with our own limited imagination and fears, we miss the message he teaches—the message given to those who face the howling winds that threaten to destroy. I've heard many a sermon about this passage convinced that Jesus was advocating for the protection of women and children. This is a social justice interpretation pitting legal rights against human rights and elevating compassion as a higher standard than the letter of the Law. But there is more. Jesus is more than a clever lawyer with a persuasive argument. His message is meant to cure and to reestablish the fertile soil and the spiritual health that enables us to live fully and with joy. Each of us, created uniquely, beautifully, perfectly— however it is that we are made. There is no one model, one cookie-cutter. Each of us is a very special and beautiful child of God. I hope you didn't come to church looking for bandaids, or earplugs, or coping skills— but for genuine health and well-being which often means seeing the world with new eyes— reimagining the world as God sees it and loving yourself and others the way Jesus loves— being able to imagine from the stakes and strings that have been planted and established from the beginning of time. Genuine health and wellbeing requires being able to see the Kingdom of God and to live in the Kingdom of God, though it may require imagination.

The radical message of Jesus, “radical” meaning “at the root,” is that his vision takes us back to the beginning—as in the book of Genesis. He takes us back to the vision of God in creation—back to be the receivers of the gift of life, back to honor and cherish our relationship with God, each other, and ourselves—back to the forest or the garden with its dark brown soil and trees and fruit of every kind. Imagine. “New every morning is the love.” A beautiful hymn. And the one we just sang, “Morning has broken, like the first morning, blackbird as spoken, like the first bird.” The prophet Isaiah says it this way:

“In returning and rest will be your salvation.”

Jesus says,

“Let the little children come to me, do not stop them;  
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.  
Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom God  
as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them in his arms,  
laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Yet what are we to do in such an imperfect world? How are we to catch the vision, see with our imagination, maintain hope and assurance which are the predecessors of courage and faith, if we are only to see the world as a battlefield where the best we can hope to accomplish is never a lasting peace? How are we to live if life seems to be one hurricane after another with thunderous injustices and strikes of defeat? We are able to live-strong because of the gifts we have already received. We are able to imagine and work for justice because of the love that we have already been given with plenty to share. And it is our calling to get impatient, *prophetically impatient*, with those who have lost the vision of God’s world or with those who have never seen it but remain mired in their own fears, see only the darkness, and spread the darkness.

Today’s gospel is one of Jesus’ hard sayings but we must be careful not to literalize it. I do not mean that we soften it, spiritualize it, or manipulate it in an attempt to make it more acceptable and palatable. I mean that we take it seriously, listen deeply and open ourselves to the work it sets before us. As told in Genesis, there is a beginning when creation is fresh and wet with life. The day you were born something new happened and yet very old. Imagine. Sr. Joan Chittister wrote,

“The willingness to live [from the inside]  
rather than to live off the thoughts and words  
and chaos and clamor around us,  
heightens our very awareness of being alive.”

What if you chose to live from the inside, from God’s dream for you and your life? Jesus does

not ask us to be like someone else or to do things in a prescribed way, but to reorient our lives, to find our life and identity in him. To return. And to rest.

*“For in returning and rest will be our salvation.”*

In Judaism a story is told of Rabbi Zusha who lay crying on his deathbed. His students asked him, “Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvah and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!” “I’m afraid!” said Zusha. “Because when I get to heaven, I know God is not going to ask me, “Zusha, why weren’t you more like Moses?” or “Why weren’t you more like King David? I’m afraid that God will say, “Zusha, why weren’t you more like Zusha?” And what will I say?

Listening and following Jesus is not about obeying prescribed and rigid rules—stakes and strings— but to use our imaginations fully in order to see what God sees. God who loves us into God’s creation. Listening to Jesus is about imaging something beautiful and great and connected to creation itself. This is nothing less than an invitation to live in the Kingdom of God and to be fully alive and becoming who God has created us each to be. Just imagine.

Amen.