

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**  
**May 15, 2011**  
**“Sign of the Times”**  
**THE REVEREND DR. D. ELIZABETH MAURO**

**PSALM 23**  
**LUKE 17:11-21**

It is my delight to be here today. Thank you, for allowing me the opportunity to step into the pulpit today.

Our sermon lesson today is a story I'm sure many of you have heard. Ten lepers cured. And only one turns back to give thanks. I don't know about you, but the audacity of this story affronts me every time I read it, in part, because preachers hold up this story as the epitome of ingratitude. Ten cured and only one says thank you! Because of that, it's easy for us to become indignant. We would never be that ungrateful, would we? And there we stop. End of story.

But today, we are not going to stop there. There are two verses that follow this story. They are often skipped over, because they are short and, frankly, problematic. “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

Scholars treat these two verses and the story of the ten lepers as separate and distinct from each other. But I believe there is a reason they were put side by side in the Scriptures. And if we don't consider them together, we miss something vital as to how we are meant to live.

In Jesus' day, it was common to discuss the end of the world. The Pharisees often debated what “signs” would indicate the end of the world. At that time, it was believed, there would come a messiah who would usher in a righteous world based on the reign of God. The signs they looked for were wars, family strife, social collapse, and natural disasters. Sound familiar?

Many in our current age do the same thing. I had a parishioner in Rockland who was fond of pulling me aside and asking me if certain events meant the end of the world was near. I couldn't blame him. We look around and see wars, violence, the collapse of the economy, the breakdown of common decency, the rising voices of radicalism, the increasingly powerful storms that blow in, and we wonder...we wonder, “is this the end that the Bible seems to speak of?” Are these signs of the end? We look over the edge and into a chasm of turmoil and feel as if we are the first to do so. But we are not the first, as our Sermon lesson reveals today. And likely, we will not be the last.

But Jesus has a different word for us. He says these signs, these events, the threats we perceive, - these distract us from seeing the kingdom that is already here. We should not waste our time anxiously trying to identify signs of the end. Rather, we should learn how to discern the goodness that God has put in the here and now. This is, in essence, what one leper out of ten was able to do. “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.” The grateful leper recognized the kingdom of God in the midst of his chaotic world. Jesus asked, “were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God?” Jesus told the Pharisees, “For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

A couple of summers ago, I read a book called, “The Sea Shall Embrace Them” by David Shaw. Because I lived on the coast of Maine, it was not unusual for me to read books about maritime history. This book was about the sinking of the steamship *Arctic* in the 1850's. Let me share with you an excerpt from that book:

“Low scud filled the sky in the pale light of a late spring afternoon in 1849 as a fierce westerly gale ripped the tops off the waves of the North Atlantic one thousand miles from the nearest land. Spray blew eastward toward Europe on the heels of the wind. It flew through the air onto the backs of the breakers and formed thick layers of foam that (streaked) across the black surface of the water before the force of the storm toppled the waves into the troughs twenty to thirty feet below.” (If any of you sail, I expect your pulse is rising.) “The howl of the wind and the rumble of the sea drowned out the curses of the sailors shivering at their...stations on the deck of the Red Star packet, *Constellation*.

“Aft on the poop deck, Captain James C. Luce scanned the ocean with the practiced eye of a seasoned mariner familiar with the hazards of transatlantic trade. ...Luce watched the seas, searching for a smooth stretch between sets of larger waves roaring toward his vessel off the right side of the bow. Fishermen...called such smooth (stretches)... *slatch*. It was a word for the order within the chaos that always existed but had to be discerned.” (p.7)

“The order within the chaos that always existed but had to be discerned.” Is that not an apt description of the kingdom among us...God’s grace that is with us even in the midst of life’s chaos? Always there, but has to be discerned. Isn’t that what Jesus is telling the Pharisees? It isn’t about looking for signs of something yet to come. That is just a distraction. If Captain Luce had concentrated on the violent waves, the deep troughs, the menacing storm and then despaired that the end was near, he could not have discerned the smooth places that could guide the boat safely through the tempest. He knew what was really important and chose to look for the slatch instead of the fury. Is that not also what Captain Sullenberger did when he guided the disabled US Airways flight onto the Hudson River...he looked for the smooth place, undistracted from what was really important. The order within the chaos that is always there but has to be discerned.

So it is with our lives. Our lives are often busy with appointments, family needs, jobs, volunteer work. Sometimes they are turned upside down with illness, family tragedy, loss of jobs, financial difficulties. Sometimes life feels like smooth sailing, and other times the waves tower over us and the troughs are deep and we wonder if we are lost. I am reminded of the Breton Fisherman’s Prayer from France: “Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide and my boat is so small.”

Jesus reminds us to look for God’s sheltering grace, his healing kingdom, his unfailing constancy in our lives. And, like the lepers, we know not everyone sees it, even when it touches them directly.

But this grace exists...the slatch in the middle of chaos. To know this doesn't mean that life is always great; it doesn't deny that big waves that can knock us off balance. This fact of the kingdom among us is not a set of rose colored glasses that Jesus offers us. That is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God is a very real space which God invites us to live into. God invites us to abide in his grace, that place of surety in the midst of uncertainty; calm in the midst of the storm.

So we must train ourselves to look for it, as a seasoned mariner learns to look for the *slatch*...the order within the chaos that always exists but has to be discerned. And what helps us discern it and live into it? First and foremost, the language of the sacred helps us live into that grace.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. (Ps.23)

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? (Ps 27)

When I read these scriptures, I am reminded that calm places exist. I am then better equipped to look for them.

Sometimes, I am ushered into the calm spots when I admit to God my vulnerability, either in prayer or song, or when I pour out my lament until I can cry no more. The week that the twin towers fell from being struck by airplanes flown by terrorists, and the Pentagon was hit by another, and a fourth one crashed in a field before it could do likewise, ...that week, I had a dear friend, my housemate from seminary, who in the hospital in Washington DC. I was in Maine. Barbara was in a doctor-ordered, drug induced coma, in severe liver failure. She was at the top of the transplant list and it was a race against time for her. The day they found what they thought was a liver match, was September

11<sup>th</sup>. The organ was in Texas. And as you remember, the government shut down all airspace. They couldn't fly. People went to heroic measures to get special clearance for the transport and they actually received permission! It would be ferried by military transport. But they did one final test before racing the organ to the airport and found the liver was diseased and useless. Barbara died September 13. When I received the news, I was already overwhelmed with the spiritual and emotional exhaustion of the week and feeling great sadness. Barbara's death was one more grief on top of pastoral exhaustion. And I didn't know what to do but cry. I went down to the edge of our pond for a good, keening, cry. Have you ever had a good, keening cry? If you have, you know it can be a place of prayer. My prayer to God during my keening cry came from the words of that wonderful hymn, Precious Lord, Take My Hand. "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." The words of a song, the affirmation of my own weakness, a way to be reminded that the kingdom is among us and an invitation to discern it. God's healing grace in the midst of soul-shaking grief. The calm place. God's peace. God's kingdom.

This hymn by the way, was written by Thomas Dorsey, not the bandleader but the son of a black revivalist preacher and a writer of gospel hymns. In August of 1932, he was in St. Louis when he received a telegram that his wife had died. Upon returning home, after driving all night, he also learned that his baby boy had died. Thomas later said, "I began to feel that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve him anymore or write any more gospel songs." But the next Saturday, while alone in a friend's music room, he had a "strange feeling" inside – a sudden calm and a quiet stillness. He told about it this way, "As my fingers began to manipulate over the keys, words began to fall in place like drops of water falling from the crevice of the rock." He found God's grace, the smooth place in the midst of chaos. And we are all better for it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. captured this is a prayer of benediction: "And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority, forever and ever.

And so look not for signs of the end, but for grace in the midst of our everyday, hard core lives. Don't lose your focus on the grace of God by becoming fixated on the world news lest you lose your ability to find the calm places in the midst of chaos. For God desires of us that we live into the kingdom that is among us, built into the very fabric of creation and always there if we but look. So we, like the psalmist must continue to pray, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation." (Ps.25) Then our eyes shall see the glory of the Lord more than the chaos of the world and we will live more fully into the kingdom of God.  
AMEN