

The Collect this morning is a prayer that we may be made children of God and heirs of eternal life, so that we might be like Jesus. Now, that is a tall order, to be just like Jesus. But apparently, that's what we're really talking about today. This means we have to be willing to be unmade before we can be made new in His likeness. And there's some pain involved, it's true. However, I'm not at all sure that all this process of unmaking, and remaking, and purifying is necessarily sequential. Maybe you'll see what I mean by the time I reach the end of the swings and roundabouts of this morning's sermon.

Joshua says that the Children of Israel need to put away false Gods. I wonder what that means for you and me. I mean, I don't remember having any statues of Baal in my closet. Oh, but I've got an awful lot of other things in my closet, and even more in the closeted corners of my ego. Now, maybe *those* shelves are the real places my false gods dwell. Are we willing to put away false Gods? This does require a choice ("Choose this day," Joshua says). And even if you ascribe to the Christian belief that our Salvation is completely and uniquely a work of God through the power of the Holy Spirit by awakening in the heart of the believer that new and heavenly faith in the Grace of the Father, poured out upon us by the precious blood of the Son's sacrifice – even if we acknowledge that you and I can do nothing to effectively win our own salvation, the fact remains that we can still get in the way of the process, and muddy up the wheels of our redemption. Because you and I are free to reject the offer of God's salvation. It's been that way ever since Eden. We can choose to accept or reject God's grace.

Oh, but that means we need to be able to make a choice doesn't it? And in order to be able to distinguish between redemption and damnation, well the truth is that there are some damnable things to go through in order for us to develop that ability to distinguish between good and evil, between salvation and perdition, between life and death, and between bliss and agony. And that, dear ones is where pain comes in.

We've been studying C. S. Lewis on Wednesday nights, and what the world of Narnia as sung into being by the Great Lion can teach you and me about God. And one of the things that Lewis said which resonates so strongly with me is that in our moments of quiet sweetness in this life God whispers to us.

But it is in our pain that he is shouting his message of love loud enough to be heard above the harshest, bitterest cries this world can offer. Pain is God's megaphone. In our nights of misery God brings his children to the clearest understanding of his grace and mercy, and the ocean depth of his love. Because when we come out the other side of our walk through the various valleys of the shadow of death which await everyone in this life, when we get through the darkness of those long bleak nights and see the sun or new hope and promise rise in our lives, only then can we finally view the choice between salvation and perdition in its starkest, clearest terms. So much of this life's suffering is all about granting us 20-20 vision on a spiritual level. Yes, choose this day, and tomorrow, and the day after that which master you will serve. But in order to accurately choose, we have to know the difference between the genuine article and its cheap and dangerous counterfeit. And THAT kind of discernment comes only at the cost of adversity, and hardship, and yes some significant hurting.

You can appreciate the blessings of sobriety only after the hangover. This does NOT mean we should sin more that grace may abound. But it does explain the importance of hardship. When Joshua says, "You cannot serve the Lord." He is reminding us of the need to be transformed if we would truly be God's. And that growth, and transformation is never an easy, painless thing.

Joshua tells the Children of Israel who promise their faithfulness to the Lord God that they are witnesses against themselves. How are we witnesses against *our*-selves? This is only possible when we come to meet and admit our broken-ness. We are all called to make amendment of life for our acts of transgression against truth, and love, and kindness. And it's not easy to own-up to how you've hurt others, particularly those who love you. But the strange thing is how God uses this broken-ness, once recognized and confessed to the glory of his name and the building of his kingdom. I was reminded by a parishioner on Wednesday night that any clergy person who seems to always walk on water is absolutely inaccessible to those who know they can't swim.

But if people realize you too have messed things up a time or twelve in life, even though you wear a collar; those members of your flock are much more likely to come and confide in your loving advice, when people realize that their priest has feet of clay as well. Yes, God will use even our broken-ness which is the product of pain, God will use even our broken-ness if we'll truly let him..

The promise of Thessalonians has been interpreted differently by different theologians, as "Pre-millennial" or "Post-Millennial." That is, we may be talking about the return of Jesus either before or after the Thousand-Year reign in this passage. Fine. Take your pick. For me the issue is secondary as to whether it's in the midafternoon or the early evening of salvation history when Christ comes back. The key thing is the promise that we will be with him, either on earth or in heaven. In a way, we are already with him. Time is no boundary. We are told in God's word that even right now, at this very moment Jesus is interceding for us – the Christ is speaking on our behalf at this very moment, presenting our defense in the throne room of heaven. You see, time is of no moment what-so-ever to Our Lord. He came, he comes, him will always come, he is even now and forever coming for you and me to bring us home. He was, is and ever shall be. He is the Lord whose victorious arrival is always in progress. Forever and ever, Amen.

This then leads us to the really priceless message of the Gospel. It's not just that we have to be alert for the Bridegroom's arrival. We are already in the presence of the Bridegroom, and thus should live our lives accordingly. And that means we are constantly being unmade and reborn. Our Salvation is an ongoing process, and we actually through it are co-participant in the act of creation, which has been on-going since the first letting-be of light. And there we are, you and me, right now, assisting God in the fulfilled creation of his universe, that is at this very moment taking shape as we worship him in this church today. We are helping God shape the salvation of mankind. That is part of what it means to be co-heirs with Jesus, who is as The Word, the very agency of creation itself.

But this morning's Bible readings say there's still some inclining of the ear and heart which need to happen. And this brings me back to a discussion of closets. In our home there is the proverbial hall closet. You may have one too, that cluttered space where summer hats mingle with winter gloves. In a hall closet, nothing seems exactly the right place in the joyful jumble of a full life. Items get tossed onto the shelves, often dropped there in my moment of exuberance at returning to home at the end of a hectic day.

Now, I've noticed recently that the top shelf of the hall closet, the one that rests just above the metal bar where our various winter coats hang – I've noticed that the top shelf has begun to shift just a smidgen in the last week or two. You see, I may have overloaded that particular space of our hall closet. And front of that shelf is beginning to tilt just a little bit under the weight of hats, and lint rollers, and puzzles, and various editions of scrabble and monopoly and the like. And soon, I expect, that shelf will incline so much that the contents will come sliding down and spill across the closet floor, maybe even out into the hall-way if the door is ajar when the collapse happens. And even if I don't think I have the time, and although I almost certainly won't feel the inclination, I will still be forced to pick all those items up and right the shelf, and carefully store things back in some semblance of order so I can get on with the messy but joyous business of life.

We all need these moments of inclining you know, when we come to that point of truly inclining our hearts to the will and compunction of God. And sometimes this inclining is slow and gradual over many months or even years. And at other times it happens with a jolt and a bang. And it's almost never without some discomfort, or complications, and some real pain. But if we can at those moments come to understand that the Lord has brought us to this place and challenge, so that we can improve our focus and vision to see his hand at work in our lives more clearly. Then, in those crossroads of humbling, we can change direction, make the choices that lie before us with clarity and discernment, and then yes, we do rise. We rise anew to meet our Lord on that wondrous plane that is always ours, even now this very day. Yes, we rise to greet him each and every day, we can rise to meet Our Lord, there on that joyous plane of salvation in the company of Jesus.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 11-09-17