

LIFE AS MUDSLIDE

Eternal God, our beginning and our end: bring us with the whole creation to your glory, hidden through past ages and made known in Jesus Christ our Savior.

A Collect for 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, based on Additional Collects, Common Worship

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10 (11-20), PSALM 139:1-5, 12-17, 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20, JOHN 1:43-51

JANUARY 14, 2018

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: JOHN 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Those of us who live in Santa Barbara County have been inundated by the flood and mudslide in Montecito. Everyone I have talked to has known someone more than casually who has lost their life, their home, their business, school or had their lives disrupted in significant ways and not for a brief moment. Some of you have lost close friends or family members. As a parish, Fr. Hank Mitchell, and Mari lost their home and barely escaped with their lives and, like many of their neighbors who survived, are living in shock and loss and the compounded grief of not

only their own experiences and losses, but mourning the losses of their community and those with whom they have been sharing life around them.

Thank God we have an impulse to help and many of us have taken action to do what we can. At the same time, as we have investigated ways to help effectively we have found, disappointingly, that, at this point, we can't use all the effort we would like to expend to try to make things better.

And, as with the fires that preceded the mudslide and any number of other incidents in life, we

want to see this as an anomaly, a deviation or exception to life. Some may recall that last week's sermon was called "Fresh Start" and hinged on the conversations we have at the beginning of a year, aiming at resolutions or some theme for the year ahead, consideration of what to write on the blank slate in front of us.

I'm assuming no one wrote "mudslide" or "death and destruction." And yet here, so early in what we want to be a New Year, whatever we wanted, this is what we got.

And it doesn't really do to say, even in the privacy of our inner thoughts, "that was them, not us." It doesn't really do to imagine that the mudslide doesn't have anything to do with life, our lives, generally.

And one of the reasons we are bothered deeply by what we hear and see and have experienced of the event is a sneaking suspicion, that I want to confirm, perhaps paradoxically, is that life is a mudslide.

The mudslide was real and really reveals what we know about life, that our things, our lives, our relationships are all constantly vulnerable to being swept away when we least expect, with or without warning, in ways we imagine and in ways we could never have imagined.

So for those who came to church to feel better about the whole thing, to be told that, in fact, the mudslide was an anomaly, that such things will never happen to us....

well...

Cold water. Especially muddy, cold water that can wake us up – and in all sorts of ways we don't really want to be awakened...

Another way to say this is to point out that Lent is coming early this year – Ash Wednesday is on Valentine's Day – but the mudslide reveals that the liturgical seasons – and every religious practice – are metaphors for *every day*, literally practice because we are and will be continuing to live our humanity in all its vast complexity.

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

We prefer hearing that only at church and only on Ash Wednesday at a preset service time.

But Ash Wednesday didn't wait for February: it is all down Olive Mill Road and that whole broad swath of Montecito and buried in that mud and the piles of debris that runs to the ocean is a lot of life, love, creativity, beauty, hopes, dreams, New Year's resolutions, memories, and so much more....

The Christian message is that God is not and will never be distant from what we are actually experiencing. The crucifixion reveals God's intention to go into the mud with us, we who are created from earth – dust and returning to dust... (in this case, just add water).

One of the incredible things about Ash Wednesday is that people are generally not paralyzed by it. It

would be a reasonable thing to never budge again, to never leave the altar having received the ashes.

Perhaps it is that accompaniment, the companionship we have with God, with the divine, the sacred, that allows us to rise up, from being dust, from the mud, and to do anything... or everything.

Our hope is not theoretical or optimistic, “thinking positive thoughts.” Our hope arises from being in God, while God is in us.

We see something of this identification of God with us in today’s gospel reading in which Jesus “sees” Nathaniel before he meets him face-to-face. God sees us all. God is our origin and is constantly, throughout our lives, coming to us, as Jesus came to Nathaniel, and drawing us into union, into connection, into love that does not know death.

One of the important things to recall about Easter is it was not pushing the “reset” button. Things didn’t go back to normal. All the betrayal, suffering and death that went into the crucifixion was a part of Easter. Jesus was never the same after the crucifixion. People didn’t experience him in the same way after his death. Through his being torn apart he became larger, available to all.

In the same ways, our hearts, our whole lives become larger through being broken.

Our aim is not a quick fix to the problem of being human, though we

may feel that is what we want.

What we get is being human with enormous losses, unanswered questions, broken hearts and, at the same time and alongside these true experiences (and sometimes because of them), we are also drawn more deeply into being creators, as created in the image of the creator, we also serve those we can serve with the accompaniment of the eternal presence, including the eternal presence of those we couldn’t or didn’t serve before, those who now know the nearer presence of God (who continue to be near us).

As human beings, we tend to divide things out and separate, but all of life is one: we are one with God and one with one another. In scripture readings today, there is the voice of God in the calling of Samuel, though it takes Samuel awhile, as it often takes us, to realize that voice is God’s call to life, his actual identity.

The psalmist (Psalm 139) offers this reality as well:

¹ LORD, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

² You trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways.

To return to the gospel reading, Nathaniel is profoundly moved that Jesus knew him, saw him with eyes that transcend typical human ways of seeing. In response, Jesus said, “You will see greater things than these.”

This past week, in his daily meditations, Fr. Richard Rohr quoted the 18th and 19th century poet and mystic William Blake saying: “*If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to [us] as it is, infinite.*”

Fr. Richard goes on to say: “Contemplation is about seeing, but a kind of seeing that is much more than mere looking because it also includes *recognizing* and thus *appreciating*. The contemplative mind does not tell us *what* to see, but teaches us *how* to see what we behold.

“Contemplation allows us to see the truth of things in their wholeness.”

He speaks of seeing what God reveals in the life of Jesus, that we are human and divine, and that our dualistic minds separated that out so that we ended up being “only” human and Jesus ended up being “only” God.

Fr. Richard and the mystics urge us to embrace a non-dual mind that can discover that to be human is to also be divine and to embrace a deep, mysterious, and life-giving way of seeing, of being with, reality. He asks: “Why does it not come naturally to us?” and he notes, as we may be experiencing these days, but throughout our lives that: “Many people experience this knowing in small glimpses, in brief moments of

intimacy, awe, or grief.”

Great love and great suffering draw us into awareness of all that we all are and also sustain us in action in the world, as expressions of God’s ongoing love and action in all things – beyond sentimentality, beyond any emotion, to a profound commitment to life in the midst of all of life.

Last week I shared part of a poem by W.S. Merwin and, strangely, the vision in this poem is still important – maybe more important today:

In his poem “To the New Year,” the poet refers to hearing a dove calling far away and writes about the New Year saying:

so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible

This is the deeper truth of our humanity, that includes our divinity, that always and through all that comes to us, all that builds up or breaks our hearts, there still lies before us what is invisible and that *...our hopes...* (all hopes), with their source in the divine life that is in us (and in all people), are *untouched and still possible*.