

The God Who Believes in Us

God of the storm's still eye: when we are overwhelmed by pressures and demands which cut us off from life, take us to a place apart where we might find again our true heart's center, our far horizon, the silence that awaits a world where we can breathe; through Jesus Christ, who brings us near to you. Amen.

Based on *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Steven Shakespeare

July 18, 2021

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. COURTNEY TAN, PRIEST

A prayer from the Iona Community petitions, "Give them the strength to let go of the God they want to believe in and find the God who believes in them."¹

Psalm 23 gives us a very clear picture of who God is to the psalmist. God is a provider and a comforter, a defender, a good and merciful guiding presence through whatever the psalmist encounters in life. Always there, always compassionate.

This is the same presence we see in Jesus and which is being fostered in the apostles. The disciples' commission was to go out and spread the Good News, through preaching and action,

through being present to people's needs. On their return they are reconnecting with Jesus, their mentor, recounting how they have fared doing this work by themselves. Noting their weariness, their need to reflect and process, Jesus suggests time apart to refresh and rebuild their reserves.

Yet their departure is noted, for now they are no longer simple disciples of a man of action and faith but becoming known as such people in their own right. When they are followed in their quest for peace and quiet the disciples may have expected Jesus to set limits and insist on being left alone for

¹ "A Wee Worship Book," Iona Community.

long enough to permit some bodily and spiritual rest. However, Jesus dives right back into ministry, compassionately teaching the crowd, and later performing healings. Jesus takes up the work in front of him without hesitation.

What was it like for the disciples to let go of the Jesus they wanted to believe in, the one they wanted to emulate, and discover the Jesus who believed they could do just that, and then expected them to do it?

The disciples were being invited to live into their potential but they still saw themselves as disciples, not leaders. They struggled to believe they were capable of doing Jesus' work, God's work. Yet Jesus knew they were capable, after all, he had handpicked them, one by one.

What is it like for us, for you and me, to let go of the God we want to believe in, and find the God who believes in us? What is it like to encounter the God who expects us to represent our beliefs, to live into the Good News every day, irrespective of how we are feeling, or what we think we need?

It isn't an easy task. We tell ourselves stories about what God expects, or needs us to do, and we may not realize that we are justifying our actions based on our version of God. How we see God changes in response to our need.

The God who believes in us may be a very different God, one who expects us to take responsibility for our actions, knows our strengths and supports us in working through our weaknesses even when we doubt our ability to do so. The God who believes in us knows we are not perfect, knows we will fail, but also knows we have the ability to make amends, to try again and again until we succeed.

It can be difficult to let go of our deeply held beliefs and to find a different way of looking at the world and our place within it. It involves letting go, undergoing an often-painful period of transition, and finding ourselves in a place where we have responsibilities which we may not feel capable of meeting. Sometimes this is personal to an individual and at others it involves a whole society or way of life.

Sithembile Mbete, a senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria speaking about this week's food riots in South Africa said, "South Africa's famed peaceful transition, I think that it was successful to some degree, . . . but it really did nothing to change the underlying economic structure. And the reality is that the economy, from 1948, . . . was structured to exclude Black people. It was an economy that was structured so that Black South Africans would be a kind of permanent underclass servicing the economy and the needs of white

South Africans, who would own assets, including land, etc. . . . And until we change the fundamental structure of our economy, I think we will continue to face the risk of this kind of unrest in the future.”²

The South Africans believed they had moved on, let go of a system which did not serve the whole population, but the transformation people expected has not materialized. Not because the concept was wrong, but because the people who labored to change the structures of apartheid paused to rest and no one else took up the work. Therefore, the process of transformation also paused. The original activists were tired, and like the disciples in today’s Gospel, felt their work had ended for the time being. This story is being played out across this country and across the world.

Inequalities and injustices are recognized, named, and the first steps are taken to correct them. But transformation takes a long, time, it involves educating others, overcoming resistance. Those engaged in the work grow weary,

need rest, and sometimes there is a belief that the baton has been passed to a new generation. But we often rest in “better than before.” We fail to pick up the baton where others have left it and the work stalls, the transformation remains just out of reach. Just as the disciples failed to realize that they would be continuing God’s work once Jesus was no longer present.

Transformation is difficult, time consuming, and at times heartbreaking work. Events in South Africa are reflected locally and nationally in our own country as we strive to maintain sight of our objective, God’s objective, of a fair and equitable world where all people are welcomed and accepted, where we can all breathe freely. It is easy to feel isolated, become overwhelmed by the details, but we are not alone. If we trust in a compassionate God who believes we are fully equipped to the task, if we recognize that change is an ongoing process and love is the action which drives it, we can, little by little, make a difference.

² Democracy Now, [“Perfect Storm” of Pandemic, Poverty & Jailing Ex-President](#)

[Unleashes Mass Protest in South Africa | Democracy Now!](#), News Report, 7/15/21.



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EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

2901 Nojoqui Avenue at Alamo Pintado Avenue, P.O. Box 39
Los Olivos, California 93441

www.smitv.org

The Rev. Randall C.K. Day, D. Min., *Priest and Rector*

The Rev. Courtney A.U. Tan, *Priest*

Ms. Jeannie Sears May, *Senior Warden*

Mrs. Karen R. Johnson, *Junior Warden*