

Our sincere apologies, the internet at Valley Presbyterian Church went down this morning, so we were unable to broadcast live streaming. We will be back next week.

Joshua 5: 13-15

Mark 9: 38-50

I hope that like me, as a Preacher's Kid, you came to worship every Sunday for over 60 years, knowing what to do, when and how. Valley Presbyterian Church has been here in Green Valley for 43 years, and we have known, that here: the Pastors wear white, there are 3 hymns, the Gloria Patri and Doxology, we say "Sins and Sinners" in the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon comes in the middle of the Worship service, if you behave there is coffee and home-made cookies following the service, Winter-Snow birds return in September and October, Christmas Eve comes on December 24th, the Patio Sale is every March or April. Far more predictable than how many days would reach over 100 degrees, and whether the Monsoons come from June 15 to September 15, We thought we knew who was who, who we are, what we do, when.

Judy and I arrived in Green Valley in September 2 years ago, beginning here on October 1st, and over the first 6 months I tried to adapt to Valley's ways of doing things. All right, so I did test boundaries by my literally giving you the clothes off of my back, and by lowering a pallet suspended from the roof; but I was also adapting to Rattle Snakes and Tarantulas; Everyone being early in order to be on time; Session and Deacons Meetings in the morning rather than at 7pm at night.

When suddenly after 6 months, the Whole World shut-down, Valley Presbyterian Church went Virtual, and all the "rules," we thought we knew, changed.

The Patio Sale which began on the Patio, and has been inside the Building, was this year held in Circus Tents.

This summer we averaged 150 in attendance inside the Sanctuary and another 150 to 200 worshipping God with us in their bathrobe and slippers, some of whom we have never met.

While we have not passed Offering Plates for a year and a half, even through August in Arizona we have made Budget and paid all Expenses.

With all of these accommodations, everyone was isolated and wore masks from each other. Our anxieties were elevated by a shortage of Toilet tissue, and the unknown future. Well done, Good and faithful, that by adhering to concern for one another, ensuring that those we care about would be safe because of our actions, we have been incredibly blessed. The reality that humbles me, is that COVID19 has plagued us for 18 months, when the Bubonic plague lasted for 300 years!

Yet, coincident with all of this an Afro-American man named George Floyd was killed, calling attention to many similar events and Black Lives Matter Protests marching in the streets. At the same time, Neo-Nazis, the KKK, the Proud Boys all began having public rallies. January 6th warfare took place at our Nation's Capitol building, 600 involved were arrested and are being tried for their crimes. As I worked on our Sermon this week, there have been concerns about reprisal rioting, enough for our leaders to again install fencing with razor wire in Washington, D.C. to protect our Elected Leaders from a part of our citizens.

And I opened the Gospel reading for today to Mark, as we have been reading, where 1500 years before the Protestant Reformation, the disciple named John describes "We saw others worshipping in Your Name who were not us and we forbade them!" But Jesus says "Whoever is not against us is for us." And quite

sincerely I said “Really Jesus?” All of the protestors and extremists on both sides: Black Lives Matters, KKK, Proud Boys, Will not long be able to speak evil? Do we still know who is right and who is wrong?

And in my heart of hearts I thought: “Go to the Old Testament! Jesus may forgive everybody but in the Old Testament there was Israel versus All the Other nations.” Then, for our Staff Devotional on Tuesday, Pastor Diane had us turn to Joshua 5. Have you ever heard this passage before? The first time I heard it, was in a Preaching Class in Seminary. We were each divided into small groups to practice preaching with one another, except I went to Seminary in Harlem, and the two classmates in my small group were AME Zion Afro-American Women, who had been preaching in their home churches since they were 12 and 15. As a Northern Midwestern Presbyterian, I suddenly realized, a sermon did not have to be like I knew, or different, did not need to have 3 points, and a sermon did not need to be a philosophical or dogmatic... that part of preaching is giving voice to the words of the people in the Bible, giving voice to God.

Imagine that you are Joshua... For Two Full Generations under Moses, Joshua had ministered to this people Israel, living in the exile of wilderness. For 40 years, leading them out of Slavery in Egypt, against all the Canaanites and Midianites and all those who attacked them in the wilderness. Joshua had been with Moses at the first Passover and crossing of the Red Sea. When the people sinned, creating for themselves a Golden Calf, Moses had Joshua pound the idol into dust and Joshua made them eat it.

But after 40 years, Moses died, leaving all responsibility to you. The people followed the Priests crossing over the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant and 10 Commandments, to camp in the plains outside the Canaanite City of Jericho. Joshua led them out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land, where in this generation God again had them celebrate the Passover anew, then the Manna that had sustained them in the wilderness could be found no more. There is no opportunity to go back to the way things were. All Israel crossed over the Jordan River, everyone ate of the Passover, Moses and manna are no more. It is the night before battle at Jericho, the night before Israel began to take possession of the Promised Land from the Canaanites. Everyone is sound asleep, when Joshua opens his eyes to see a soldier standing over him with his Weapon drawn.

What I treasure about this passage is the realization, that we cannot assume God is on our side? I cannot dictate where God has to go. I am not the ultimate authority for what is Right and Wrong. Perhaps as Jesus described, there may be other agenda here besides my control, or my perceived opponent's, and the realization that God can use any circumstance for God's own purpose. If during the French Revolution, we had tried to dictate Right and Wrong, we very well may have chosen the Aristocrats over the illiterate poor masses. We are ruled by our fears and desire for control. After September 11, 2001 part of America's justification for going to War was identification that “Those who are not for us, must be against us.” Claiming to be Christian, we need to bridle our anxiety and trust God to turn the world upside down.

Part of the fun of the Bible, is that you have to always keep your mind open for coincidences, similarities. Does this passage remind us of any other? As Joshua is leading the people into the Promised Land, earlier in the Old Testament was there ever a time when the people of God were met by an Angel with a Sword? The Garden of Eden, when humanity was exiled for their having Sinned; and second, the Prophet Balaam when his donkey speaks against his cursing Israel, so he blesses Israel instead. So are we to identify Joshua leading the people out of the Wilderness and into the Promised Land, as Re-Entering the Garden of Eden? Perhaps that questions of Right and Wrong, Blessings and Curses are not as easy as whose side you are on, but being attentive instead to where God is.

At which point, Jesus has this saying about Salt. Now, recognize while the Church has long been symbolized by the CROSS and the FISH, the CHURCH was also intended to be SALT FOR THE WORLD. Our attitudes toward Salt are very different today, with Low-Sodium Diets, than at this point historically. Prior to freezing and refrigeration, salt was a method of preservation of food from bacteria. At earlier times in medicine, salt was used to draw out poisons and cauterize wounds. In parts of the world where there is ice/ snow, salt is used to evaporate water and allow life to carry on. In small quantities salt is a fertilizer to make things grow, but massive quantities, salt will poison the earth. In ancient cultures, gifts of bread, water and salt, were gifts of hospitality that we care about you and provide for your needs. But geographically Jesus' point is the Sea of Galilee is a fresh water lake, out of which drains the Jordan River, running passed Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. Because the Jordan River picks up salt as it travels, the Sea of Galilee with a natural exit providing water to others remains pristine, fresh and clear. Because the Dead Sea goes no where, has no river draining it, no place to go with all the salt accumulated, the Dead Sea cannot sustain life.

Much as Joshua leading the Israel out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land, what is important to us in FAITH is not being Vaccinated against the problems of the world; not being afraid of strangers; but for the first time in our lives TRUSTING GOD to use us, trusting that it is not up to us to decide who is right and wrong, who is good and bad, trusting that "WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US, IS FOR US!"