**Waiting in Hope**

**Luke 17:20-21**

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Charlottesville. Houston. Puerto Rico. Syria. Las Vegas. Northern California. North Korea. If you are like me, each of these places has, sometime in the last two months, become indelibly printed on your heart and in your mind by intense emotion. Grief, anger, fear, compassion, bewilderment, horror, disgust, fury, anxiety, helplessness. In the nine weeks since the riots in Charlottesville, we have seen protestors beaten, communities destroyed, homes burned, war threatened, and a madman gun down hundreds of concert-goers at an open-air music festival in Las Vegas.

I am weary – I think many of us are. It feels as though every time we begin to catch our breath from one disaster, another strikes. And it doesn’t help that so much devastation – whether at the hands of humanity or the whim of the elements - feels so completely out of our control. Even the most faithful among us may feel lost about now, wondering, “Where is God in all of this?” How do we, who sit in relative isolation from all the destruction, who have the privilege of getting up and going to work, sending our kids to school, knowing that we have food available when we stop at Kroger and clean water that will flow from the taps when we need it…how do we respond?

What we are feeling has sometimes been called compassion fatigue. Or, I happened to hear a few minutes of Krista Tippett’s radio program, “On Being” this morning, in which Tippett’s guest, Buddhist Roshi Joan Halifax, spoke of it as empathic distress. So often when we are confronted by tragedy after tragedy like this, I think our natural response is to become numb. We can’t handle any more bad news and so, in some sense, we separate ourselves from it. We focus on what is real and tangible in our lives in the moment. We pour our energy into what is immediately before us, grateful for what we think we can control, and then numb ourselves to the pain and the suffering and the anxiety that come with the rest of it.

In this sense, we’re not so different from the people of Israel as we encounter them in Exodus. These are people who have already been through a lot. Remember, before they began their journey in the wilderness, they were slaves in Egypt. Through the unlikely leadership of Moses, God led them out of Egypt and promised them that one day they would arrive in the land of milk and honey. A land that would be their own. A place where they and their descendants could thrive happily and healthfully.

But, like a lot of people who have struggled and suffered, these are people who also have trouble with trust. Over and over again, they want proof of that God is with them. So, when they begin to doubt that they can find their way in the wilderness, God provides them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them. Soon after, when they worry about whether they will have enough to eat and fresh water to drink, God provides them with manna.

And when we meet them at the start of chapter 32, they are feeling lost and anxious. You see, they are camped out at the base of Mt. Sinai while Moses has gone up the mountain to talk with God. The problem is that Moses has been gone for forty days, and they don’t know if or when he will come back.

We can imagine that at first they waited patiently, glad for a break from traveling. But, as the weeks pass by, a growing anxiety takes hold of them. Where is Moses? Is he even still alive? Has God deserted them? If God is gone, how will they ever find their way out of this wilderness to the Promised Land?

With all tangible evidence of God gone, they need reassurance and hope. And so, they go to Aaron, brother to Moses and his right-hand man. “Come; make gods for us, who shall go before us.” They seek out comfort in other gods, and Aaron does what they ask. He gathers all of the gold they have between them, melts it down, and molds it into a golden calf. The people immediately transfer their allegiance from Yahweh to the gods of the golden calf.

Aaron tries to bring them back to their God, the God of Israel. He makes the best of a bad situation and builds an altar, announcing that they will have a festival to the Lord. The people hold a party, making sacrifices and offerings but still to their new god, the golden calf. With the distraction of a party, they forget their anxiety about what has happened to Moses and where God has gone and whether they will ever make it to the Promised Land. They have something else to focus on, another God to worship. Yet, relief from their angst, a distraction to numb them from all of their worries, comes at a cost - they break the first commandment God has given them, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me".

This brings us back to where we find ourselves in this autumn of 2017. Already we’ve acknowledged that so many things have happened in the last few weeks that we might question our faith in God. For us, our vision of the Promised Land is the vision of God’s kingdom – a world community of justice and equality, health and wholeness, peace and vitality for all God’s children. Right now, that kingdom feels far, far away.

Lost in a wilderness of confusion, anxiety, cynicism, and helplessness, many of us have already stepped away from God and sought out other idols to worship – the idol of materialism, the idol of busyness, the idol of alcohol or food or iphones or screen time - whatever numbs our worry and creates a cloud between us and the ravaged world around us.

Who will go to God for us, as Moses did for the people of Israel, and ask God not to condemn us for our lack of faith but to help us be more faithful? Who will help us to find our way in this wilderness of mass shootings, wildfires, and hurricanes to a place where we can act rather than be paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of need? Where do we find hope to sustain us as we wait to see the kingdom fulfilled?

As followers of Jesus, we find our hope in him and in the community of faith that is the body of Christ. Jesus offers us hope – not the false hope of empty words – but hope that recognizes all the pain and despair around us but then reminds us that our promised land, the kingdom of God, is already here among us. We are not helpless in the face of all that has been happening. We know when we study together and emulate the life of Christ, what we are called to do.

Like Jesus, we’re called to pray, to ground ourselves in our faith. Pastor Steve Montgomery, pastor of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, wrote to his congregants this week, “Prayer for me provides hope, not in ourselves, or what we want God to do, but in the God who will continue to surprise and amaze us, as God did in the empty tomb.”

Of course, I believe in the power of prayer, and I think there is nothing better to bring us back to God from whatever idols we have created. But I, like many others, am also out of patience with phrases like “our thoughts and prayers are with you” after events like the shooting in Las Vegas. Our prayer must lead to action. Jesus would not have changed the religious landscape of our world had he stopped with prayer. Rather, he offered help and healing to those who suffered – much like we can offer aid to victims of hurricanes – and he was a persistent advocate for change – changes in unjust systems of oppression, changes in rules and policies that perpetuated poverty, violence, and injustice.

As his followers, we have his example, but we also have each other in the body of Christ to help us act out of faith in the kingdom of God. As United Methodists, we have UMCOR – the United Methodist Committee on Relief – one of the most well-regarded aid organizations in the world. We have our Mind the Gap group which addresses poverty and hunger. We have church members actively involved in Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. We have Rainbow Crossing advocating for the rights of LGBTQ folks in the church. And outside these walls we have a whole diverse community of people from different races, ethnicities, and religions whom we can befriend in an effort to model true compassion and inclusion.

Yes, we are weary. Yes, the last few weeks have been heart-breaking and mind-numbing. We want to close our eyes and pour our energy into our other idols. But, right now, the world needs what we have to offer. If we don’t model compassion and justice, if we don’t step up in the face of destruction and violence, who will? We can’t stop and allow ourselves to become distracted by all the other things we have to do, feelings we want to suppress, fear we want to avoid.

We are the bearers of God’s hope into the world. We are the carriers of, the builders of, the kingdom of justice and love and compassion that Jesus ushered in. So, turn away from your golden calves whatever they may be, and put to action the faith God has planted in you – faith that we can be better, our world can be safer, and God’s reign will be fulfilled. We are waiting – we are weary – but we have something to offer – we have the hope of the world.

May it be so. Amen.