

2008 Bishop's Prayer Retreat (Bishop's Convocation)

Sermon by Bishop Margaret G. Payne

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Isaiah 43:1-7, Romans 8:18-27, John 17:1-19

Given my experience of the world over these last few months, whenever I read scripture out loud publicly I expect to hear a voice from above booming out these words: I am the Lord your God, and I approve this message.

And what is the message this evening?

For one of the first times in my preaching life, it seems to me that all three texts work together so well that the message can be summarized in a single sentence:

“Do not fear – put yourself into the hands of my Holy Spirit and go forth into the world to glorify my name” – end of message.

Unfortunately, not end of sermon.

This evening I want to think about the world – especially the world in which we live now, at this time and in this country – and think about it in the context of Jesus' prayer for the disciples in John 17.

As I read these verses from John 17, the word “world” leapt out at me, again and again, in a way that it had never done before.

I am not asking on behalf of the world
I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world
The world has hated them
They do not belong to the world
I do not belong to the world
Do not take them out of the world – but protect them
They do not belong in the world
I do not belong in the world

What is this “world”?

When the bible uses the word “world” it means:
the God-rejecting aspect of our human society,
and also those who invoke God's name to cover up allegiance
to the values that are in opposition
to the will of God and mindless of the needs of the poor.

But of course, it is not always so simple – it is a mystery, the wheat growing together with the tares, the good cracked open to reveal evil, the renegade, shown to be holy.

But lately the picture is much more clear than usual.

The fear and injustice and greed and loss that is the mark of a God-rejecting world is upon us all – in staggering clarity.

We are victims, and we are to blame; we do not belong to the world, but we participate in it, and even, at times, cheer it on.

If the world had been listening to the Word of God and to wise stewardship guidelines – give 10 percent, save 10 percent, live on 80 percent – we wouldn't be in this mess, and credit would not have become the voracious monster that it is, eating up whole economies as well as homes and individual lives.

But the Word of God to the world is never: **I told you so!**

The Word is: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

And we are the messengers of that Word.

I think that we leaders of the church, have not so much been hated by the world as scorned, dismissed, and deemed irrelevant.

All along we have been preaching the truth,
sometimes heard, sometimes unheard,
sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging,
shaping communities of faith.

But how can we understand our role now, in this time of great fearfulness, in this place, in this time?

Perhaps our first inclination is to try to suggest solutions, to say what should be done, to wade into the issues – and we do indeed have a responsibility to speak for the poor and insist on justice and vote for whatever form of change in government that we believe will turn the tide of catastrophe.

But the more profound role that is ours in this time is to be leaders who connect to God with such a renewed intensity, that it sets us on fire to be beacons of light and stability for a world catapulting into darkness.

The world has been busily at work over the last couple of decades:
choosing aggression over compassion
winking at outrageous greed
confining spirituality to individual hearts
idolizing material goods
and all the while invoking God's name and favor for all these things.

Actually – it has always been so, but the present time is a magnification of all the ways that the world suffers from alienation from God and from one another.

Now, especially now, we are called first to be still.

In our stillness, we abide in Jesus, who does not belong to this world,
and who is the only one who has and is the way
to extricate ourselves from the brambles of our human excesses
and to free us into the life of God's kingdom – so that we can be
a source of joy and peace in the midst of all this pain.

Our lifelines to God and the heartbeat of our faith are Word and Sacrament.

But it is an intentional life of prayer – that unceasing, infinitely varied,
empowering, humbling, mysterious, joyful interconnectedness with God that is
the daily life-flow that equips us – that draws us away from the demonic
distractions of the world and our own will, and into the will of God for this time, for
this place.

The life fueled by prayer understands itself in the terms of the love of Jesus – a
self-giving love that shapes itself to the needs of the world.

But we are human, not divine, and we are limited, and it is important to
remember that when people in need and pain come relentlessly to us for some
word of comfort or explanation or reason to live.

We need to keep in mind that we are not reservoirs of the living water of Jesus,
but conduits.

If we think of ourselves as reservoirs in such a time as this,
not only will we become drained and finally useless,
but we will have been unfaithful –
imagining that we can provide life
when in fact we are called to be channels of grace,
and companions along the way.

We need to be still and know God as our beginning place, and our daily discipline
– our way to enable the living water to flow through us.

Henri Nouwen once said that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.

Just when we are feeling excited about becoming relevant again, and to give the world some good advice, he reminds us to simply stand in the world and be available.

Perhaps a vulnerable availability is the best gift that we can give, in this place, in this time, in this world.

The theme of this year and this convocation – unceasing prayer – is very timely and a gift to us – to help to equip us for a ministry of availability that is the embodiment of the message of the incarnation.

Of course the time now in our world is frightening in a thousand ways, and difficult, but our lives of prayer remind us constantly that we are walking with Jesus and filled with his peace.

Did you hear the grace in verse 13?

Jesus prays to God:

But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

With Jesus, we have joy that the world does not know, and perhaps this is a time when the world can see its strength and its hopefulness more clearly – through our words and care.

My prayer for all of us here is that this time together
expanding and deepening our lives of prayer,
worshipping and confessing and opening our hearts to healing,
deepening our relationships with one another so that we can more
truly share the easy yoke and light burdens of ministry ...

... this time together will be blessed, and will renew us for our precious call to lead the church of Jesus Christ in this time, in this place, in this world.

Amen.