

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, 13 November 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Supply Priest

Today's collect has always been one of my favorites, not only because of the lovely rhythm, which makes it so pleasing to say, but more because it perpetually challenges all of us to examine and strengthen our relationship with Scripture. This collect expresses well our Bishop's emphasis, for lay and clergy alike, on rooting ourselves in the daily practice of reading scripture, not blindly or thoughtlessly, but with intention and openness, bringing our whole best selves into conversation with God's Spirit and the community of the faithful over the millennia whose experience we encounter there. Bishop Diana is one of those speaking these days about 'surfing the chaos' and reminds us that regular immersion in scripture gives us the best tools for surfing, for staying on top of the chaos, not being knocked into the churning. I like to think of immersion in scripture as a way to keep hold of God's hand as we walk the lonesome valley, move ahead through the chaos.

Listen to the collect again:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

It is enlightening to realize that while many of our Sunday collects date back to the first few centuries of the Common Era, composed by famous saints of the Church, this collect was newly created for the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549. This was of course a time of great controversy in Western Christendom. By this point, every parish building in England by law had its own copy of the aptly named Great Bible, a full translation into 16th century English of the entire Old and New Testaments. The Bible was chained to a lectern in the church for all to see. It was chained so that no one could steal it, so that it would be always available to everyone.

This was a radical new thing. Just over a decade earlier, William Tyndale, author of most of the Great Bible translation, was pursued into foreign lands and assassinated by the English King's agents for the crime of translating the scriptures into English, into the language of the people. For centuries the Rome-centered church hierarchy, allied to European monarchies, had kept the Bible under lock and key, and only available in the Latin which had been the language of the people when Saint Jerome had created the translation in the 4th century specifically so that everyone could understand the scriptural texts, but over the course of more than a millennium language evolved. And while Latin was retained as the language of scholarship and authority, most people knew only the vernacular of their own communities, developing into Italian and French and German and English and so many others.

The people conducted their lives in their many local languages, but were only allowed to hear God's Word in the official Latin, and only those portions allotted by the authorities, and only with the interpretations issued by those same authorities. So this move to make the full text available to everyone was a radical new thing. Not everyone could read, but everyone at least knew someone who could read to them. And suddenly it was seen to be a good thing for everyone to have access to the whole of Scripture. This radical idea had brought about the execution of many more than just Tyndale, but the idea thrived.

This was a radical collect, asserting that ALL Holy Scriptures are written for our learning. They are good for us, good for the community, good for everyone. And we do not need them predigested by someone else before they are healthy for us.

So we have the Scriptures made available – and today they are available to us in a vast variety of English translations and in more than two thousand other languages, so that everyone can find a text that makes the meaning accessible. What are we meant to do with that abundance? We are expected "to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them."

We are meant to hear them, to listen, perhaps with our eyes closed, to be attentive to the words read by another member of our community in the context of worship. I personally enjoy the discipline of listening as the words are read, not reading along, but hearing what new Word may come to me with this person's unique inflections and emphases. This hearing together is part of what binds us in community. And even after so many decades I still hear new things.

We are meant to read them for ourselves as well – and not only in a cursory fashion.

“Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” – we are meant to read them over and over, to chew on them, let them become part of us so that we are nourished and transformed. One fruitful Bible study practice is to look at a chosen passage in at least two different translations as we contemplate and discuss, to help us digest, to help us hear God in the words and through the words.

Hearing, reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting Scripture is all about stories, about listening to stories, and telling them, about watching stories unfold and living into them, about letting the right stories become the heart of who we are as individuals, and more importantly who we are as a community. In the collect we are asking divine help in taking the stories passed down to us through the community of faith into our hearts so that we can grow into the people we are created to be. Developmental psychologists have noticed that the stories we hold in our hearts, the ones which become rooted in us determine our reactions, our behavior, our selves for our whole lives. I have always taken this seriously especially in choosing the stories that I share with children, my own and all the ones I shared in my years as a school Chaplain. The stories that take root in our hearts determine who we become and can sustain us through the darkest times.

These are dark times in our world, war and political conflict and climate disaster and so much more are part of our daily experience. In today’s Gospel reading Jesus acknowledges the awful things that are bound to occur, natural disasters and personal disasters and political disasters. He says, “Yes, all those frightening events that people fear and warn about will occur, but do not think that they are ‘signs of the end’. Things like that do happen and will happen. Your job is to remain secure in your relationship with God in Christ, to ‘read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest’ the Word. We are commended not to look for portents, for signs of what is to come, but to look at what is happening now and to figure out how we can live through it without letting go of Jesus’ hand held out to us, without forgetting the promises, without forgetting that we are here to care for one another, to love one another as God loves us and has always loved us and will always love us.

Today’s very joyful psalm, showing the rejoicing of all creation can be one of those things to hold in our hearts. You might find dissonance here, wondering how they can rejoice when we are relentlessly destroying the planet, but the Psalm reminds us of the beauty that is still there, of the wonderful resilience of creation. Do the wonders of nature (like the beautiful lunar eclipse on Tuesday morning) inspire us with wonder and confidence? I hope so. For me Psalms like this one are a good corrective to despair which shuts my eyes to the beauty around us.

The Epistle reading highlights a different aspect of our lives, as the author commends us not to be weary in doing right. His words have been used over the millennia to scold other people for not doing the work someone else thinks they should be doing, to exclude them and deny them food and aid – but Paul is not telling us how to look at others, but how to look at our own lives. He reminds us not to wait around for someone else to fix things for us, but to always be looking for appropriate work to do, to support others in their needs. It is a message of hope in dark times – however bad things may get, there is always work for us to do; there is always a way we can help; a way to live into the people God created us to be, as individuals and as communities.

One important aspect of the approach to scripture reflected in the collect is that it is dynamic. We do not sit down and commit the whole of scripture, or some selected portions, to memory and then have done with it. We use our senses and our minds, our whole selves, in an ongoing process of digestion. Just as the food I ate this morning adds calcium to my bones, iron to my blood, energy for all my living, just so each encounter with scripture nourishes us, helps us to heal, and grow, and thrive. It is food for our living as the people of God, people of faith and hope and love.

Now I invite you to join me in reading the collect together:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.