

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday, 14 May 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of God, who created, loves, and sustains all that is. Amen.

Our readings today are an interesting assortment to think about on Rogation Sunday. Acts brought us Paul on the Areopagus urging everyone to recognize in themselves children of the loving God revealed in Christ. Then came Peter's long and controversial exposition on Church as God's ark, that scholars have been arguing about and interpreting and reinterpreting since the days of the Church Fathers. And finally we heard Jesus promising to send us the Holy Spirit, to be with us always, to guard and guide us.

In this week's journey with Jesus lectionary reflection, Dan Clendenin provides a helpful reflection from the wonderfully thoughtful and always inspiring Fredrick Buechner on the church as Noah's Ark. I found it helpful and hope you do as well.

“In one as in the other, just about everything imaginable is aboard, the clean and the unclean both. They are all piled in together helter-skelter, the predators and the prey, the wild and the tame, the sleek and beautiful ones and the ones that are ugly as sin. There are sly young foxes and impossible old cows. There are the catty and the piggish and the peacock-proud. There are hawks and there are doves. Some are wise as owls, some silly as geese; some meek as lambs and others fire-breathing dragons. There are times when they all cackle and grunt and roar and sing together, and there are times when you could hear a pin drop. Most of them have no clear idea just where they're supposed to be heading or how they're supposed to get there or what they'll find if and when they finally do, but they figure the people in charge must know and in the meanwhile sit back on their haunches and try to enjoy the ride.

“It's not all enjoyable. There's backbiting just like everywhere else. There's a pecking order. There's jostling at the trough. There's growling and grouching, bitching and whining. There are dogs in the manger and old goats and black widows. It's a regular menagerie in there, and sometimes it smells to high Heaven like one.

“But even at its worst, there's at least one thing that makes it bearable within, and that is the storm without — the wild winds and terrible waves and in all the watery waste no help in sight.

“And at its best there is, if never clear sailing, shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last.

Thus, Jesus the redeemer effected a great reversal. Whereas the waters of the Flood brought death and destruction, the waters of church baptism bring new life, protection from danger, and a shelter in the storm.

“After God judged the earth with a flood, [God] established a covenant or agreement with Noah. "Never again" — a phrase that's repeated five times, God promised, would [God] judge humanity like [God] had, "even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood" (Genesis 8:21). The scale and scope of the Noachic covenant is as comprehensive and universal as the waters of the flood. God's covenant extended not only to Noah, his family, and his descendants, but to "all life on earth," "all living creatures of every kind," and even more remarkably to "the earth" itself (Genesis 9:13, 15, 17). The protection of God is for all people everywhere, not just a select few, and it is the mission of the church to be [God's] safe haven.”

As that safe heaven, we provide refuge and welcome and blessing to all who come to us – or at least we try. Because it is hard for us, and we often fail, we find it also important to pray, to beseech God for help in our task.

Rogation Sunday is about asking God's blessing in times of fire and flood, plague and war, to ask both relief from suffering and strength to meet the needs around us. Originally, as we were praying for God to look after our parish, I (with I hope some of you) would 'beat the bounds', that is march around the physical boundary of our entire town, or whatever geographical boundary expressed our limit, knowing that other priests would be marching about the bounds of theirs, in vestments, with crosses and sometimes incense and holy water, inviting God's special protection and blessing on all our area.

In recent decades, Rogation Sundays have been revived and modified to suit modern circumstances. Our parishes do not often have physical boundaries and when they do it would be an intimidating walk to make a circuit of the whole place.

Rogation Sunday has come to focus on prayer for all the earth and in particular for that part of it of which we are stewards, a time to give thanks and renew our sense of responsibility for God's good garden, which is the whole earth.

What has become more contemporary custom is to bless specific places of growing things, especially community gardens or nearby farms. At Saint Aidan's we do not have a community garden, but we do have a place of public refuge in our labyrinth and garden.

So while we are still praying for relief from plague and famine and all sorts of natural disaster (like unseasonable heat waves) as always, we are particularly praying for God's blessing on this place and the people who seek refuge here.

At the end of the service, we will go outside and sing and pray in the midst of our beautiful grounds, experience God's sunshine and beauty in the extraordinary burst of blooms all around, and pray at stations, the traditional word for places to stop and pray.

As we follow the choir and sing, and interrupt ourselves to 'stop and pray', let us remember those who worked to provide this place of refuge and those who sustain it, those who are buried and remembered here, and especially those, both friends and strangers, who seek solace and comfort here.

As the church we are the ark, the place commissioned by God to provide refuge, safety, and comfort for those in need. Let this Sunday be a time of giving thanks for our opportunities to do that very thing, and of asking God's wisdom to sustain our efforts and expand our vision in the future.

Let this be a Sunday, not of focusing on fear of famine and plague and war, but on hope and vision and promise, the promise of God that the world will not again be destroyed, and the promise in Christ that we can be its ark of refuge, God's Spirit being always with us as our helper, protector, and guide. Amen.