

33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2013

I don't know about the rest of you, but I no longer appreciate parts of scripture that threaten the faithful with hell fire, eternal damnation, and mighty scary signs from the sky every November. The end of the calendar year and winter are coming, not the end of the world. How many times have we been threatened with the end of the world, just in the last decade? I think the Mayans predicted the end last December. After a while, it just becomes tiring. If God didn't end the world during World War II when 60 million people were killed, then I don't think the end is coming any time soon.

Those who believe in the end times and talk and write about them usually think that ending things would end seemingly unsolvable problems. And things get ended in scripture the way human beings solve their problems – by murder and mayhem, fire and earthquakes and famines and plagues. The self-righteous seem to really enjoy these stories, mainly because they think it has to do with everyone else rather than them. Oh, goody, God is going to get those bad guys! For many, love means punishment and destruction. It gets to sound like a bad sci-fi movie.

So, I thought we might talk about different signs; signs which are probably more useful than hoping for the day when all evil doers will be reduced to stubble as the reading from Malachi- which was the designated lectionary reading- says. Sometimes I think that these end of days readings have given the western world a death wish.

I don't think that God would send wars and insurrections as a signal that the end is near. Instead, I think God wants God's world a very different place. John 3 reads, "For God so loves the world." That line precludes the divine destruction of the world either in the past, in the present, or in the future. The deity would not send Emmanuel to a world that the deity intended to destroy, or one God had destroyed once by water. Destruction and God are not words or ideas that go together.

Instead, God sends/sent love pressed down and overflowing into our laps. God has done this forever. It's the divine nature. It's almost as if God is sending us a poem, "How do I love you? Let me count the ways."

Our first reading describes the immensity of God's love and mercy. It's so big, a runner can see it from afar.

Take a look outside. Remember what the leaves looked like last week? Remember the night sky with the quarter moon and the pillowy clouds? Remember how the ocean looked during the summer? Do you recall the daffodils and tulips last spring? In spite of whatever trouble we or the world is having, regardless of how much power any one dictator can have, the sun rises every day. We can enjoy or chose not to enjoy our beautiful world. The world and everything in it has been given to us by God. It is humanity that causes the havoc of destruction, not God.

The immensity of God's love doesn't let us off the hook, though. If people are to be helped to see the wondrous glory of creation and everything and everyone in it, they need to see signposts of love, rather than hear threats of destruction are generally very helpful.

Those of us who confess Jesus basically agree – b/c our designation- to be living signs of divine love, visible to all who see our actions and listen to our words. What do signs of God's love look like? Well, they look like us.

Because of this, we Christians need to be shining examples of love and life. Hypocrisy drains the very life and meaning out of any institution. The clergy abuse scandal more than proves this; as does the extremely comfortable life style of the world's catholic bishops. Native Americans had a great phrase for this – talking out of both sides of the mouth. Actions, always and everywhere always speak louder than words.

To give you a little example of the creeping effects of hypocrisy. When I babysit for my grand-daughters, I meet five year old Ella at the bus stop. Last Friday, she got off the bus all excited. "Guess what?" she said breathlessly. "Miss R. , the bus driver has a rule that nobody can eat or drink in the bus. And we saw her eating M 'n M's! We're going to write a story about it and draw a picture because she wasn't following the rules!"

By five, we know hypocrisy when we see it even if we can't name it, even when it involves a very small thing like candy. Ella thought the

whole thing was really funny. In another five years, she'll regard actions like this with disgust and ridicule. It's really no wonder that teenagers regard adults with suspicion as their trust in their elders gets whittled away hypocrisy.

Gandhi wryly commented that while he liked Jesus, he was not particularly fond of Christians while George Bernard Shaw wrote that Christianity might be a good thing if anyone actually tried it. Ouch! Gandhi, and Indian and Shaw, an Irishman, knew first hand what they were describing.

One of my very favorite hymns describes those Christians whose love is big enough for any runner to see from afar: To be your bread now, be your wine now, Lord, come and change us, to be a sign of your love, blessed and broken, poured and flowing, gift that you gave us. Bud, as you all know, was always a sign of God's love.

Secondly, we must live according to the Word of God. I'm going to borrow from William Stringfellow's writings. Stringfellow wrote, "I am called in the Word of God – as is everyone else- to the vocation of being human, nothing more and nothing less. To be a Christian means to be called to be an exemplary human being." Not a perfect human being, mind you, but one who tries one's best to love God and love one's neighbor.

What does being called in the Word of God look like? In our baptismal promises which we renew each Easter season, we promise to believe in God and to reject Satan and the glamor of evil. I don't believe in Satan any more than I believe that a loving God would destroy the divine creation, but the glamor or evil, what a great phrase! What a reality for frail human beings! There are so many seemingly glamorous things we can get caught up into which are not life giving for ourselves or for others. Some of these things both look and sound good and even get called religious or get enforced by law. This is what makes them all so scary. Here, we need to bounce sometimes our cherished beliefs up against the gospel imperative. What does love that comes from God look like? What are the signs of God's love? Love doesn't look like destruction.

Rather than encouraging destruction as punishment for sin as we have heard over and over again, the Word exposes the profound lack of love, the violence that poses as correction, and the indifference to poverty that we see engulfing the modern world and essentially asks us to expose these acts for what they are.

Back in the 70's, the Five Man Electrical Band had a song called, "Signs." Do you remember it? "Signs, signs. Everywhere there's signs. Blocking out the scenery. Breaking my mind. Don't do this. Don't do that. Can't you read the signs?"

What kind of sign we present to the world is up to us. Are we blessed and broken, poured and flowing gifts of God's love? Or do we block or cloud or reduce the size of God's dream of love for us?

The song "Signs" ends this way. "Thank you, Lord for thinking of me. I'm alive and doing fine."

That's God's sign. The sign of love. What will yours be?