

Until He Comes Again
II Samuel 23:1-7
Revelation 1:4b-8

“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”

“Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their foot on the firm and stable earth....they had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies, no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour....What could not sustain them but the Spirit of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say, ‘Our fathers...which came over this great ocean, were ready to perish in the wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord and he heard their voice and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good and his mercies endure forever.’”

The words could have been written by most every Syrian refugee, whether Christian or Muslim, whose sinking raft made it to the shore of Lesvos. The words, in fact, are the words of William Bradford, passenger on the Mayflower and first governor of the Plymouth Colony. Furthermore, Bradford’s account of a meal between the native Wampanoag and the surviving refugees from England, known as pilgrims, has been cited by Presidents from our nation’s beginning until now as they declare that a day shall be set aside to give thanks to God for the blessings of this land.

If you are marking time by way of the nation’s story, this Sunday is Thanksgiving Sunday, the Sunday before the Thursday when most of us will sit down to a table laden with more food than we can consume, surrounded by friends and family, who have come not only to count our blessings with us but to multiply them, hands joined and heads bowed to give thanks to God before we dig in. Yet we gather as participants in an ongoing story. In his Thanksgiving Proclamation, the President traces our celebration of Thanksgiving back to the early 17th century, when those fleeing the oppressive rule of King James I of England boarded boats on which many would perish before they neared these shores. Once on land, the hardships continued as they attempted to tame the land that surrounded Plymouth Rock. The Wampanoag apparently met these strangers, in the beginning, with open minds and hearts and hands, helping them to survive the harsh climate and teaching them how to grow crops in the rocky soil of *New* England. When the first harvest was in, all broke bread together, Puritans giving thanks to the God who delivered them from great peril, Wampanoag to the Great Spirit who gives life to the earth and sustains all living things.

Two years later, the colonists, I am not kidding, would erect an eleven foot wall around their encampment, flanked by five canons. The severed head of a Wampanoag and a cloth soaked in Wampanoag blood were then posted on that wall as a terror to any who would threaten their well-being. “We welcomed you, the white man, with open arms,” an ancestor of the tribe wrote for the 350th anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock, “little knowing that it was the beginning of the end, that before fifty years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a free people.” The words were banned from the celebration in 1970: not the way we tell the story!

A century after the landing, George Washington set aside a day on which the new nation would give thanks for the “providence of Almighty God,” for God’s open hand that had provided not only material blessings but also the blessing of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for the male descendants of those who had fled England in search of civil and religious freedom. A century after that, Abraham Lincoln declared a “day of thanksgiving” in the midst of the nation’s deep division, sounding a different note by acknowledging the plight of the most vulnerable and asking citizens to commend to God’s tender care the widows, the orphans, the mourners and those whose freedom would finally be won at the cost of unimaginable carnage. In the last century and over deafening objections, President Roosevelt moved the date of Thanksgiving up one week, hoping in the depths of the Great Depression that the changed date would boost retail sales. Two years later, in 1941, Congress returned Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of November. Still, Roosevelt ultimately got his wish, for after Thanksgiving we begin the countdown to Christmas as consumers, free-market capitalists, citizens of a liberal democracy, and, this year, as voters who favor, by a large margin, closing our minds and our hearts and our hands and our borders to present day pilgrims lest our abundance be diminished or our security threatened by those who are strangers, as we once were strangers. This is sometimes the way it goes if you are marking time by way of the nation’s story.

If you are marking time by way of the church’s story, this is the Sunday when we read the last chapter. It is a chapter written in a cave on the little island of Patmos, off the Turkish coast (ten hours by ferry and 109 euros from Lesvos). The author was a Palestinian Jewish Christian named John, an elder in the early church, who had fled Jerusalem during the First Jewish Revolt against Rome. John writes toward the end of the century to seven little

churches in Asia Minor, encouraging them to remain faithful to Christ, even and especially in the face of impending persecution and death. This is not a book written for religious hucksters predicting the end of the world; it is a book that holds hope in solution for any who know what it is to live and die under the oppressors' rod. In very graphic passages, John describes both the vengeance that is God's on the Day of Judgment as well as the vindication that will belong to those who hold fast to the faith. But listen carefully: because vengeance is God's, John does not tell Christians to visit God's judgment on their enemies by taking up arms. Instead he assures them that soon their persecution will come to an end, when Christ returns to reign on earth as the ruler of kings of the earth. If you mark time by the church's calendar, this is Christ the King Sunday.

Two thousand years later, we are still waiting and wondering how we are to live in the meantime, until he comes again. John's short answer is that we should live as citizens of a kingdom where the reign of the God, who is and was and is to come, has already begun; that is, to borrow our stewardship theme, to live as a community with open minds and hearts and hands because death and death-dealing powers no longer have any power over us. Because love and not the grave is our destiny. While I would not necessarily commend John's strategy to Washington or Paris or Berlin, believing that there are times in human history when evil must be opposed by force, I do believe the witness that must be borne together by all of God's children—especially God's Christian, Jewish and Muslim children—is the witness of communities whose open minds and hearts and hands offer the most vulnerable God's comfort and hope in times such as these. This is how we tell the story—or is it?

Tragically, those who mark time by the biblical narrative often live out of a different interpretation of the story. Beginning at the beginning with Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachael, Joseph and his brothers, as well as first century Jews and Jewish Christians after the destruction of the Temple, we read the story whose beginning we share as a story of sibling rivalry. This is the story of the God who finally loves only us and does not love those who are not us. Each community has used the story faith tells us to underwrite the violence done, in God's name, by tribes and nations, by conquerors to the conquered, by rulers to the ruled—in the meantime and until God's reign begins.

Given the religiously tinged carnage of the last two weeks, I think that is why Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' rereading of the beginning of the story that Christians, Jews and Muslims share, in his recently published book on religious violence, entitled *Not in God's Name*, caught my attention. In fact, a link to an interview with Sacks is on the church's Facebook page and is embedded in the text of this sermon () soon to be posted on the church's website. Watch it!

Rereading Genesis from the first murder committed by Cain against his brother Abel to the astonishing pardon pronounced by Joseph over his brothers (the tribes of Israel) who had sold him into slavery, Sacks invites the three Abrahamic religions to hear the counter-story of Scripture told through stories that appear, on first reading, to be about sibling rivalry. The counter-story is the story of two covenants: the first covenant after the flood is God's covenant with our common humanity having to do with the universality of justice; the second covenant with Abraham is God's covenant with our specific identity and has to do with the particularity of love. That is to say, in opposition to the sibling rivalry of tribes, of groups, and of nations, God has promised to be just to all of us and to love each of us, in that order. "To know that we are loved must be enough," Sacks counsels. "To insist that being loved entails that others be unloved is to fail to understand love itself."

But of equal import is the counter-story's emphatic command concerning the stranger. Only once in Leviticus, Sacks observes, does the text tell us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Thirty times Israelites are told to love the stranger because they were once strangers. Story after story, including the story of Jesus, we are invited to see the world from the perspective of the other, the outsider, the exile, the rejected. Mostly in this mean time, we are declining the invitation.

Nevertheless, it is the case that the stories by which we mark time also tell us who we are. Their particular angle of vision affects the way we make sense of the world and act in the world that is coming at us day by day. Until Christ comes again, John says, make sense of these senseless times by remaining faithful to the story of God's universal justice and scandalously particular love made flesh in a vulnerable child—who is, even now, ruler of the kings of the earth. Become, more and more, the kingdom he has made us to be by his love and forgiveness: a community as vulnerable as the Lord we follow, whose open minds and hearts and hands toward the other bear witness to God's justice for all and God's love for each, until he comes again.

May the pledge you are about to make be significant enough to remind you, every day, what it is to love the Lord with all of your heart and soul, with all of your mind and strength and significant enough to enable this community to be the kingdom he has made us to be by his love and forgiveness, until he comes again. Thanks be to God. Amen.