

Good News for the Disconnected?

Colleagues,

I. Today's date calls to mind the evil that still rages in the world, as it always has. I've been listening of late to a pair of brilliant podcasts about the histories of Rome and Byzantium. They remind me that the wrath and ruin visited on New York and Washington thirteen years ago is as nothing compared to the incessant horrors endured by others in ages past. Have you heard of the sack of Antioch in 540 A.D.? Probably not. The tale gets buried in the mountain of like episodes that sin has heaped up, each terrible beyond words to contemplate when you try donning the skin of someone who was there. Now ISIS stalks where the Persians once did. Already lurking in the shadows of centuries to come is an endless line of others equally bent on power, plunder, and blood. We who aim in such a world to speak of Gospel had better bear in mind that unless the "good news" we're talking about is God-sized stuff, we're spouting drivel. Peace and justice projects toyed with at leisure in safe suburban congregations are not the Church's vocation. To imply otherwise—am I the only one who hears that implication, and all too frequently?—is to mock the Church's vocation, and the God who has called us to it. Grievously, it also relegates some billions of corpses to the dust and ashes that consumed them when the evildoers stormed through. To me that seems heartless. It begs for a prayer, "Come, Holy Spirit," and with the praying, perhaps, a large bucket of water thrown squarely in the face, icy cold enough to jolt us awake and remind us what our calling in baptism is

truly about.

We're in the impossibility business. We tout what slaves of the possible will regard as drivel, like the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. Driving the tout is the astonishment that Ron Neustadt put his finger on so neatly last week, namely that mercy has trumped justice as God's bedrock principle for solving the problem of sin. Thus Easter, and the Gospel it trumpets. Easter, of course, is the Ur-Impossibility, so to speak. But we are nothing if not Easter people, addicted to dreams of things that cannot and will not be, except that an impossibly Trinitarian God should authorize them and make them so.

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II. Thanks to Peter Keyel, who keeps the Crossings Facebook page current, I stumbled yesterday across my quote for the week, if not the month: "If you are a pastor and preacher, and no one ever accuses you of preaching antinomianism, then you are not faithfully preaching the gospel given to St Paul."

That comes from a 2013 blog post entitled "[Cheap Grace, Costly Grace, and the Justification of the Ungodly.](#)" It's by one Aidan (Alvin) Kimel, an Orthodox priest who started off as an Anglican, then dallied for a time with the Roman Catholics. It's well worth the read.

III. With that I come to the day's chief offering, a sermon that attempts to tout the impossible in the hearing of some folks who would seem, over the years, to have kept a studious distance from the Church's crazy talk. The occasion was a recent funeral, yours truly as preacher. Half the extended family was about as unchurched as unchurched can be. I had to assume going in that they didn't know the Great Story or standard Christian

vocabulary. There was even so that Promise to tell, and that crucified Christ to anchor it in. So I tried. How well or poorly it came out I'm not prepared to say. I dare to pass it along anyway because the challenge of that audience is one that all of us are bound increasingly to face, whether officially as preachers (in the case of some), or more frequently and unofficially as friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors who get called upon from time to time to account for "the hope that is in you" (1 Pe. 3:15). Again, the question: how do you talk crazy-good to folks whose imaginations have never been stretched, not really, beyond the constraints of that which can be? May the effort here help you to think, critique, spot ways to do it better, and, when your turn comes around, to inject a stony mind with a hint of hope in God.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

At a recent funeral, held in a church. The readings were Psalm 23, 1 Corinthians 13, and John 14:1-6—

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On a certain Sunday every year we at Messiah invite members of the church to fill out a little form for pastors to use when the day comes to sit down with family members and plan their funeral.

For people who aren't used to church this will sound a bit morbid, I suppose. Death is something we don't like to think about too much, especially not our own death. The world we live in every day does its best to pretend death away. It celebrates

life, and that's a good thing. It celebrates youthful life in particular—and there, I think, it goes overboard. If the only information I had about America was the information I gleaned from the TV shows they make in America, I'd have to assume that 90% of Americans are young and beautiful and smart beyond their years. It's not that way, of course. Most of us are not so pretty, and all of us come down at some point with wrinkles and gray hair; and it's only when those wrinkles show up that you start to realize how dumb you were when you were still in your twenties. If we valued wisdom in our culture we'd wear our wrinkles like badges of honor. Instead we're pushed to hide them. It's not just that wrinkles are not so pretty. They're also a bit scary. They announce to the world that every life has got to end.

One of the gifts of going to church is the gift of being pushed not to hide things but to face them squarely. That's one reason for this annual exercise at Messiah of filling out that funeral form. Not everyone does it, but Diana did. She knew this day would come—the one we're at right now, I mean—and part of getting ready for it was putting together another little gift for those of you she would leave behind. The gift in this case is that set of passages from the Bible that you heard just now. It's also the hymns—the songs—that we're using at this service. If you haven't done so yet, I'd encourage you to open up the books and follow along. What you'll find there are words and thoughts and prayers and, above all, some incredible promises that were tremendously important to your mother, your grandma, your friend. They helped to make her tick; to get up every morning and put her feet on the ground, one after the other; to do that even in those moments when she was drowning in sorrow because Roger had died, or gasping for breath because her lungs weren't working the way lungs are supposed to.

Diana never stopped hoping for the future, a fantastic future,

in fact. These words will tell you where that hope came from. They'll tell you too where she got the wisdom that came with her wrinkles. It's a genuine wisdom, and a useful wisdom too—useful in the sense that you can put it to use for the sake of the people around you. It's the wisdom of trusting God.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” I won't always be needy, that is—gasping for breath, say; aching for the person I've lost and can't ever bring back.

We'll hear these words again at the graveside. They do as good a job as any of capturing the great hope that kept Diana going.

God is for me. He's on my side. I matter to him, and I matter profoundly. So he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He'll go so far as to resurrect my body, to bring it to life in a form that will leave me gasping not for breath, but for wonder. So with this in mind, with God at my side, why ever should I fear the valley of death that every human creature is bound to tumble into. On the other side there stands a table, a banquet table of the kind you find in the palaces of kings. On it is a place marker that bears my name. The feasting is grand, and the cup of joy is never empty. For now the God of goodness and mercy keeps dogging my heels, so determined he is to get me where he wants me. Where is it he wants me? At home with him forever—not floating around in some kind of vague, spiritual ether, but vividly and physically, as real as real can be. That's the promise that Diana said Amen to. Amen is nothing more than fancy way of saying “For sure.” Amen and amen. That's “absolutely for sure.”

Now, there's nothing new about these words. They've been loose in the world for at least 3,000 years. They don't get the play or the credibility in America that they did when Diana was young. Back then the culture was somewhat predisposed to take

them seriously, and lots of people went so far as to learn them by heart, but that, of course, has changed—dramatically, it seems to me. There are lots of reasons behind the change. One of them, I suspect, is the world's guilty conscience, the sense that nobody, but nobody, is good enough to deserve what the words promise. And with it comes the accurate suspicion that nobody wants to be good enough to deserve what the words promise. To be that good would mean, of course, not having fun. I don't say that at all flippantly. Truth is that life as we know it is short—and the older you get, the more you realize how short life is. And we'd like to enjoy it. But where's the pleasure in being so good that you spend the whole of your life on other people and never on yourself? How else does a person earn a place at the table that those old words talk about? Better that we should forget about it altogether and go about our days as if it can't be true.

Or you can do what Diana did, and not just Diana, but Roger as well, and countless people before them. What you do, that is, is to pay attention to another set of words from God, words in this case that are focused squarely on that person most all of us have heard something about along the line, Jesus Christ is his name. Come to think of it, it's still impossible in America to miss out altogether on hearing about this person, if only because people bark out his name when they're feeling frustrated, or disgusted. I'm not sure why, but that's what they do.

We also catch his name at the major holiday called Christmas. The marvel of that holiday is the way it underscores what Jesus was and is about. The word is giving. Undeserved giving. No parent in their right mind buys presents on the basis of how much the children have earned. Instead we give good things because we want to give them; because we love our children; because we want to see their faces come alive with happiness and

delight. Diana took huge delight in seeing that look in the faces of all of you, her dearest ones. She told me so.

God's aim with all of us is to see our faces come alive with joy in him. To make that happen he gives us not what we deserve, nor even what we think we want. Instead he gives us what we need. What we need, of course, is someone good enough and strong enough to break the hold of selfishness and sin and death on every human heart and mind.

There were shepherds in the field one night—you may have heard the story. They were gross and dirty men, the total losers of the day, dying creatures lost in darkness. "To you is born a Savior," God's messenger said; and he sent them to go see Jesus. The Son of God, God's gift for them.

The passage I read before I started features this same Jesus, now a man, a man about to die in fact. The enemies have laid their plot. They'll arrest him this very night, and tomorrow they'll kill him.

And on this very night, there sits Jesus at a table with a little band of followers. They're a so-so mix of men. Not a one of them would pass the kind of goodness test that counts for anything with God.

"I'm going," Jesus says, "to make a home for you; a place for you in my Father's house. A seat for you at the everlasting banquet table you've heard about."

"Trust me," Jesus says. "Trust me to get you where God wants you to be, and where you'd like to be as well if only you had the nerve to imagine it."

Later that night these men he's talking to will take for the hills with their tails between their legs, leaving Jesus to his

fate. Does that stop him from loving them? And on that day called Easter, when God raises Jesus from the dead, does their stupidity, their disloyalty, their appalling cowardice—does any of this keep Jesus from tracking these men down to bring them back to life with God? It doesn't. Not for a moment.

Was there anything Diana ever did or didn't do that was grievous enough to shut down the gush of God's love for her in Christ? There wasn't. And what was true of her, is true of you as well. She wanted you to hear that. Her Christ, her Savior, is your Savior too. If you'll let him be, that is.

"In my Father's house are many rooms," Jesus says. "I have each of you in mind for one of them." The time has come for Diana to discover how serious Jesus is and was and always will be about all his promises, and this one in particular. Is he beaming with delight as he leads her to the door of the room that has her name on it? Well, of course he is. As for Diana, there is joy, a joy that fills her brand new lungs with life, her spirits with a rush of thanks and praise that will not stop because it simply can't, it won't. It's just that good, that true, that real, and on and on it goes forever.

How else can you react, except with thanks and praise like this, when you're finally face to face with the Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things?

This Love—the Love of God, that is, Christ Jesus is his name—is waiting with arms wide open for all of us, and more to the point, for each of you, the ones Diana loved the best. And that's finally what Diana, so wise and lively, wanted all of you to hear today.

"Trust him," she would say. "Trust him well, trust him always, spend your days with hope and courage, no matter what may

come—and let him bring you home.”

God grant it. Amen.