

Proper 16, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B – August 25, 2024

“We are People of the Word”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 | Psalm 34:15-22 | Ephesians 6:10-20 | John 6:56-69

I’m going to preach from the lectern today, where the scripture is read traditionally.

The eagle in front of me is one of the tetramorph, the four shapes that represent the four evangelists. The symbols—three animals and one human—appear in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. The eagle represents St. John the Evangelist. There are many theories as to why John is associated with the eagle. One explanation is that his Gospel describes the Incarnation of the divine Word or Logos. so the divine Word becomes human, God becomes human. John’s Gospel begins “in the beginning was the Word...” The eagle symbolizes that which comes from above. This is who we are as a Christian people. We read, mark, and inwardly digest God’s Word and live by it.

In the pages leading up to today’s reading from John’s gospel, people struggled to understand and accept Jesus’ teachings. This was his lesson: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” They could not understand why Jesus said that they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to abide in him and live forever. Now, standing on this side of history, knowing how Jesus’ story ends, we have context. We can relate that teaching to the whole of Jesus’ life. We can connect it to communion where we eat bread and drink wine, but people living in Jesus’ time could not make these connections.

They did not understand. Some of them turned back and no longer went with him. Only twelve believed, and one of those would betray him.

It doesn't surprise me that Jesus lost followers. If you've ever taught a course, you know that if you're not careful, you can lose students who don't understand a lesson. They can fall away. I wonder, too, if this is happening in the Church today. We see things and hear things that we don't understand. It's easier to turn away than to stay, but Jesus didn't expect his followers to understand everything. He asked them to believe in him and in the life of the spirit. Jesus asked his struggling students, "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? [Listen carefully to this part.] It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Jesus was introducing them to a new way of being in the world.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians about the armor of God reminds me of my teaching days also. A colleague at my first faculty job at Florida International University in Miami would sometimes wear a jacket and tie when he had to teach a difficult subject or had a challenging group of students. Ray would say he needed to put on his "armor." Wearing a jacket and tie projected a bit more authority, and that gave him confidence.

Paul appealed to the Ephesians "to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." He called on them to put on protective armor, a bit like the professor's jacket, so they would always stand firm. Interestingly, the believer gets to "put on whatever [shoes] will make them ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace." There's always the obvious choice of sandals. I'll let your imagination play with that one.

The armor protects the wearer against "the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil..." I put on the armor of God years ago. In dark times, the devil's arrows hit it

more frequently. Let's see if I can give you a sense of what that means. My mother died after a fall that happened two weeks ago today. Since then, my armor keeps getting hit by arrows—the “what ifs” and “should haves.” “What if” I had waited for a call closer to her. “What if” I had found a way to spend more time with her, as I'd promised, on the move from Florida to New England. I “should have” flown up for her last birthday. Then, there are evil thoughts that would divide my family and friends—a bubbling up of old jealousies and moral injuries. All of these temptations, these flaming arrows, were and continue to be quenched with the shield of faith. The whole armor lets us move through the material world and remain wholly present in the spiritual world. The armor locks in life and love and helps us to stand firm in our faith.

We are people of the Word. Today's scripture readings teach us these lessons: Be open to the life of the spirit. Love so strongly and live so righteously that when we are not physically present, our spirit will remain to fill the hearts and minds of those who love us. If we need extra help, put on the armor of God to keep us standing on firm ground.