

WELCOME 27 May 2018 – 1 Pentecost '18 B

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you all here this morning. Please stay with us for morning tea...you know that's going to be awesome.

"On the run". That's the situation for nearly 19 African athletes and officials who failed to return home after the recent Commonwealth Games in Qld. More than a month after the games ended...they are on the run, in hiding, living in fear of being discovered, caught, deported & perhaps punished in some way.

How different from the early Church. They too were on the run, forced out by the violent persecution Jesus promised would happen & they scattered to all parts of the globe. They were under fire...under threat...living in a world that was against them. But rather than go to ground, play it safe & keep a low profile, the early church had another plan. *"The believers who were scattered preached the good news about Jesus wherever they went"*

They carried with them an urgency to live out what Jesus had commanded from their first breath of the day to the last breath at night knowing somewhere in b/t might be their last moment on earth. Jesus calls the Church today to have that same urgency; to be a Church on the run preaching the good news wherever we are scattered...living w/ the urgency of our last moment on earth.

We'll explore & experience that today.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Heavenly Father, your holiness is not limited to grand cathedrals or saintly persons, spectacular mountains or mountain-moving leaders; your holiness is often discovered in simple everyday places and simple everyday folk...so plant Your holiness in this place, in us now. Grow us this hour, that we might flower, right where we are, with the beauty of Your presence...Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

1 PENTECOST '18 B – CHURCH ON THE RUN

ACTS 8:2-8

FAITH CHAT:

1. "A comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing ever grows there." Has your faith grown most in comfortable times or not-so-comfortable times? Why do you think that is?
2. When is the last time you shared your faith in Jesus with someone who was not a Christian? What happened? If "never"...why not?

Learned helplessness – Stockholm syndrome...I first encountered those terms in long-ago psychology classes. But I have seen both in real life...Learned helplessness is a condition that occurs in both humans & animals when we have been conditioned/learned to expect pain, suffering, or discomfort with no way of relief - feel helpless to avoid negative situations. Over time the sufferer stops avoiding pain at all—even if there is an opportunity to truly escape it! Stockholm syndrome is psychological response where a captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors, as well as with their agenda/demands.

Situations of long-term abuse...those who are being held in some way against their will...even folks with chronic illness/pain start to embrace the worldview & attitude of those with the upper hand...simply give in to the assumption that to try to act differently is useless...different circumstances but similar responses...stop trying to live outside of the hurtful circumstance & sometimes assume that you deserve it.

Saul was one of the witnesses, & he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; & all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea & Samaria. (Some devout men came & buried Stephen with great mourning.) But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men & women to throw them into prison.

If anyone was going to give in to helplessness...to embrace the worldview of their enemies/oppressors it would have been the early followers of Jesus. They were outnumbered, out-muscled against 2 formidable adversaries (the Jewish leadership & the Roman state), under threat, under attack, in the crosshairs, on the run...There was blood in the streets & it was theirs. Stephen had been stoned to death...violently killed for publicly declaring his faith in Jesus Christ & now his killers & their supporters had blood on their hands & they wanted more...nothing less than stamping out the band of Christ-followers by any means necessary. So...driven from their homes, chased out of their villages, forced to flee from the safe confines of the livelihoods & lifestyles they had known...What did they do? What would you do?

But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. You know as well as I do...fear/threat of pain/potential struggle or hardship, from whatever source & for whatever reason, can stop you dead in your tracks. It can so overwhelm you that you start making bad, unwise, or unfaithful decisions. It's easy to give in to or actually start to embrace the negative circumstance as unavoidable...to simply surrender to it...But God calls us to another way of living. God in Jesus invites us to let faith – trust in Jesus - be our inspiration for living. God call us to let faith overcome/conquer our fears & let faith in Jesus' promises & devotion to Jesus' will/way in this world drive/guide our lives.

Paul writes in Romans 8:15: *God's Spirit doesn't make us slaves who are afraid...Instead, we become God's children & call him Abba our Father.* Instead of being slaves to our fears & to the things that would cause us to lose trust in God's promises & give up our hope in Christ's purposes for us, God calls us into deeper trust, more profound hope, & life with a purpose – His purpose in this world.

The church was on the run...but the runners were faithful men & women who in the face of what must have been profound fear stood faithfully in God's will & way & purposes with incredible trust & profound hope. God not only calls us to that way of living, He provides his Holy Spirit within us to empower us to just such living.

Last Sunday Paul Prenzler shared he was speaking to a group of students & faculty out at the university on the topic: "Science and Religion Christianity: Friend or Foe in a Post-Truth World". I didn't see it in person but in listening to it later via the internet...I was so struck/moved I knew we had to hear from Paul...so he's going to share some of his insights gathered over a lifetime of Christian faith, years of teaching Chemistry at the university level, & many many hours of prayer & research that went into his presentation...

- Why that title/topic? How did you decide to go there?
- How have you seen faith marginalized or undermined in your vocation as a scientist & educator?
- In your lecture, you spoke of humans having made a choice to live in a post-truth world. Where truth is irrelevant. If our world thinks what is true no longer matters, what has taken its place? (truth-testimony-evidence)

College professor Kay Haugaard, who has for years taught Shirley Jackson's story *The Lottery*, about a town that stones one random inhabitant to death every year. She says students used to react with horror — but now they say who are we to judge human sacrifice if it's part of someone's culture? – Glen Reynolds (U of TN Law Professor)

- Do you ever find yourself leaning toward the fear/despair helplessness/hopelessness end of the scale? What do you do?
- As a Christian, how do we speak with authority & courage to our acquaintances about the truth of Jesus?

On the night of his betrayal Jesus says to his closest friends, *"Here on earth you will have many trials & sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* Not too many weeks ago we heard what John wrote to encourage Christians struggling under persecution saying, *"But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won your fight...because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world."* The trust, hope, & purpose to which God calls us is unbreakably bound to God's eternal desire to redeem & recreate all Creation, not to our life circumstances – the historical conditions of this life.

You see...when we claim our identity as a child of God, we see the world differently & when we see the world differently we live differently. We begin to claim God's purpose as our own. (What God wants; we want) We begin to claim God's intended future for this world as our desired future. (God wants all people to embrace Jesus as Saviour & Lord; we want all people to embrace Jesus as Saviour & Lord. God has established his rule of love/grace & we have the Spirit's power to live that so people can experience it & be drawn into it.) The future/destiny God has given us is not to be filled with fear, but to be overflowing with confident faith, exuberant hope, resilient joy, & irresistible passionate love. Our destiny is not to behave as if our challenges/struggles/threats will determine the future, but to live knowing the future has already been determined in the resurrection of Jesus so we can enjoy the fruits of that future right here & right now.

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Let's pray: Lord Jesus come today and set us on fire with your life and your love. Pour out your Spirit in us so that every day this week we too might invite others into your abundant joy, your limitless strength and your boundless hope. Let your light and your fire be bright in us so that others can rejoice in you. We pray in Jesus' Name...Amen..