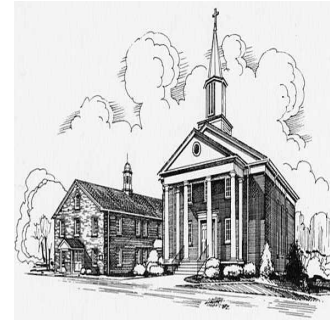


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

## **Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**Year C**

**RCL**



Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

John 12:1-8

### The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD,  
    who makes a way in the sea,  
    a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse,  
    army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
    they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
Do not remember the former things,  
    or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
    now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
    and rivers in the desert.  
The wild animals will honor me,  
    the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
    rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
    the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

## Psalm 126 Page 782, BCP

### *In convertendo*

- 1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
then were we like those who dream.
- 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
- 3 Then they said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
- 4 The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we are glad indeed.
- 5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses of the Negev.
- 6 Those who sowed with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.
- 7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

**John 12:1-8**

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have

the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”



## SERMON

The earliest teaching I can remember receiving from my church was that Jesus died for my sins. I was four or five. It would have made as much sense to me had I been told that Jesus died for asparagus. I had never tasted asparagus and I had no idea what sin was. When I asked, I was told that sins were the bad things you do which distress God so much that Jesus had to die for me to be forgiven. This was described to me as the “good news”. I didn’t think it sounded like good news at all. I simply couldn’t imagine what a little boy could have done that was so bad somebody had to die because of it. I didn’t ask any more questions about it after that. I was afraid of what the answer might be.

When we offer the Gospel to the world, it simply has to mean something in the here and now. It won’t do to offer as the Gospel a mashup of childhood stories

having to do with a heaven up there and a hell down there, then expect for it to be received with great joy. The people to whom you are speaking don't understand the world in that way. The people to whom the Gospels were written had a particular worldview that is different from the worldview you and I share. The people alive at the time the Gospels were written didn't just "believe" that creation was a three stage affair with heaven up there, hell down there and us between the two. They knew it as a fact. It was not subject to debate without bringing your sanity into question. We don't live among people like that. The story of Jesus has to be relevant to the lives of the people who live now or it will not be received at all.

Our worldview, the things you can't debate today without bringing your sanity into question, draws its beginnings from the Epicureans. It is an arid landscape,



frankly, of Newtonian predictability, a mechanistic view of creation in which events proceed as on a billiard table, one ball striking another. In our worldview, events ricochet around the table in accordance with very complicated equations. We find it not at all unreasonable to accept this account of things, since it is pretty much what everyone thinks, and so we never inquire about the billiard players. That's the big difference. The worldview of the people of Jesus' time included the billiard players. Our worldview does not.

Notice that I said billiard players, plural. I want to emphasize again that I am not a dualist. I do not perceive the world to be the prize in an enormous tug-of-war between a good God and a bad one. Nonetheless, as we discussed last Sunday, ancient peoples took evil more seriously than we do. They personified evil as demons and devils. They spoke of powers and princi-

palties. We can scarcely find room for God in the arid landscape we find ourselves in, let alone make room for demons and devils, powers and principalities. I would maintain that we cut ourselves off from very useful language by doing that.

I want to be clear that I am not urging you to fancy ten little devils behind every mishap and I certainly wouldn't be pleased to see you fretting about a Satan who is somehow God's equal. I'm urging that we reclaim some of this language of devils and demons, powers and principalities so that we may be able to speak with one another intelligibly.

And what would we speak to one another about in the language of demons and devils, powers and principalities? We would speak about our place in Creation, the place in Creation of the institutions we have built, and the way things keep coming unglued. Perhaps we

would speak about living out the consequences of the cross in our daily lives.

I have said several times that the world we live in is a purpose-full creation, a creation filled with things for our good, not our harm, and intentionally so. If we are created to love one another as ourselves, if every institution with which we interact is created to serve the common good, why is there so much dysfunction in the world? Evil is the word ancient people attached to the observation that so very often people and the systems we create to allow us to interface with the world deviate from their proper purpose and become harmful. It is a good word, a descriptive word for how else to explain our observation that things just inevitably seem to go wrong? If every man's actions are righteous in his own eyes, and nobody sets out to do evil for evil's sake, why do the wheels keep coming off?

Ancient people understood that people and the institutions they build have a spiritual aspect to them, guiding angels, if you will. Powers and principalities are the words the ancient people applied to the guiding angels of the institutions and systems we devise as humans. Governments, corporations, churches, schools, all these powers or principalities have a guiding angel. Today, we might speak of a corporate ethos, or a governmental culture. Just as with people they are subject to being lured from their original purpose. They become demonic when they deviate from their original, beneficial purpose. It is a good word, and it describes that which we observe so often: just when a principality reaches the point at which it could soar to the heavens and lift God's children with it, the wings fall off.

Corporations, being so enormous a part of our country's economy, are a good focus point for us. Adam

Smith was an eighteenth century philosopher of capitalism. In his view, businesses exist to serve the general welfare. They are the powers through which we engage the economic world and provide goods, services and employment to our people.

Today, however, that purpose has been appropriated by the demons of greed which have diverted them from the path for which they were created. Today, the focus of the corporation's efforts is no longer the general welfare, but the bottom line. According to Smith, profit is the reward corporations are given for their labors in pursuit of the general welfare. Profit is the means, not the purpose of a corporation. The influence of the demon of greed has subtly altered that purpose to single-minded pursuit of the bottom line. It is this which drives corporations to pay their employees so little that many are on public assistance, the so-called "working poor".

With the demonic shift in perspective from that urged by Adam Smith we now docilely accept the idea that the public purse should underwrite the labor expenses of Wal-Mart so that Wal-Mart may enjoy a healthy bottom line.

Or take sports. Games are good for us. They are relaxing. They provide diversion. Beyond that, they offer little toward the common good. Education is the investment we make in our children to prepare them for rewarding lives. It would be hard to over-estimate the contribution that teachers make to the common good. Alex Rodrigues makes \$29,000,000 a year for playing a game. Teachers make chump change and often have to buy supplies from their own pocket. Just as with people, when the powers and principalities which should exist only on behalf of the humanizing purposes of God revealed by Jesus deviate from their purposes, they be-

come demonic.

What would it look like, I wonder, if a human could actually cleave to the purpose for which he was created, and follow that calling through his entire life?

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ... Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

A few Sundays ago I argued that the story of Jesus had to be read back to front. Nothing "happened" to Jesus. There was no interruption of His purpose. His mission wasn't crushed by the powers and principalities

which opposed him. Jesus was lifted up above humanity on a cross of sin's creation from which he absorbed the full brunt of the demonic forces that keep subverting our purposes and exhausted them.

We live in a world governed by powers and principalities which have deviated far from the humanizing purposes of God intended for them but we have agreed not to acknowledge this. We can watch that beautiful scene in *Miracle on 34th Street* in which Santa tells the customer that Macy's has ice skates, and very good ones, too, but that another store has skates with better ankle support, and think wouldn't that be nice? Impossible, but nice. It's only impossible because our worldview shows us the pool balls careening over the table, and never lets us consider the billiard players. For our worldview, Santa's actual presence at Macy's can never be anything but a fantasy.



The situation is not hopeless, though. The principalities, like the individual, can be redeemed and redirected back to their intended purpose, just as you can be, for all of us are created for good, all of us fall, and all of us are redeemed, constantly. Santa Claus can work a great change at Macy's and that change can even spread to Gimble's, but that commitment must be renewed every day for the wheels will just come off again. Creation, fall and redemption are not one-time events. They replay constantly. There is no point in our lives at which we can proclaim, "There! That's done!"

I began by saying that reclaiming the language of devils, demons, powers and principalities reclaims our ability to speak intelligibly about our place in Creation, the place in Creation of the institutions we have built, and the way things keep coming unglued. Perhaps we can speak about living out the consequences of the

cross in our daily lives. This is what I mean: if we fail to adjust our worldview to allow for the billiard players, we will constantly have revolutions of one sort or another seeking to replace “bad” powers or people with “good” powers or people. Until we name and acknowledge the forces which counter our efforts, we will be beset with them and never know why.

SOMETHING there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun;

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

The work of hunters is another thing:

I have come after them and made repair

Where they have left not one stone on stone,

But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,

To please the yelping dogs<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

Robert Frost was speaking of walls. He could as well have spoken of people and their institutions which constantly fall from their God-given purposes into something demonic and hurtful. We, God's ambassadors, are called to set the walls right again, to call out in protest when the powers and principalities deviate from their roles into profit-seeking and humanity destroying courses. We are to be aware of the billiard players for living out the consequences of the cross in our lives means living in assurance that redemption is possible, and needed, every day.

In honor of the name chosen by the new pope, attend to the Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be con-  
soled, as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal  
Life.

Amen.

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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