

Season after Pentecost

"Hear, O Israel"

Narrative Lectionary Year 2, Week 5

October 11, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings Mark 12: 28-31; Deuteronomy 5: 1-21, 6:4-9

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

One of the inhabitants in the fictional town of North Haven, Minnesota is a VERY lively seven-year old named James. He talks a mile a minute, sleeps sporadically and adores Angus and Minnie, a retired farm couple in their eighties. One afternoon on a Halloween, James burst into their living room, bitterly upset that his mom had gotten him a Teenage-Mutant Ninja Turtle costume. “No one cares about Teenage-Mutant Ninja Turtles anymore. My mom should have known that! I’m going to die if I have to wear that. What am I going to do. I can’t wear that costume. Everyone will make fun of me. What am I going to do?”

In her usual calm but detached manner, Minnie suggested he could be a ghost. All their boys had been ghosts every year growing up. Those ghost costumes were probably still up in the attic. Angus, who adored James, was quick to take the boy up the attic stairs to look for the costume. And there they were! Not much to a ghost costume. Just a sheet with holes for the eyes and a belt to hold it all together. Angus and Minnie insisted on a reflector belt since it had already snowed in Minnesota and you can’t see a ghost in the snow. The little boy could hardly stand still long enough to get the belt on.

He was going trick-or-treating alone, so Angus said he’d trail along behind to make sure the boy was OK. Before Angus would get his coat, James raced out the door full speed and ran smack dab into their maple tree. As Angus rushed out to be sure he was okay, James picked himself up and ran full speed ahead again. This time he ran into the neighbor’s box elder tree. And this time, he knocked himself out. Angus raced over to the boy. “James!” he hollered. “James, are you all right?” When he looked down at the boy, he realized that the eye holes of the costume were not lined up with his little eyes — not even close. James couldn’t see a thing. Angus reached down and adjusted the costume so the boy’s eyes lined up with the holes in the costume. When little James opened his eyes, he was surprised, and said, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be able to see!”¹

When the Israelites crossed the parted Sea into freedom, they were ecstatic. There was dancing and singing. Their God — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — had proven more powerful than Pharaoh and any Egyptian gods. After such a dramatic display of mercy and might, there could be no doubt. But soon that joy was tainted with fear. How would they know which way to go? What about water? Food? The Lord took care of each

of those needs and led them to Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb, because God knew they had another great need — a need of which they had not yet become aware. They were no longer under the laws and customs of the oppressor Egyptians. What guidelines would they use for living with one another as a community? You only have to look back at Genesis, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the shenanigans of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob the tricksters and his sons to see that any euphoria of cooperation and freedom would not last for long among the newly liberated Israelites. Maybe it would start with an argument over who got to drink the water first or which family's tent had the best view or who looked the wrong way at someone's wife or daughter. Anarchy is not to be mistaken for freedom. "Any thing goes" is like running at full speed into trees because you can't see out of your ghost costume. Without an understanding of community good and guidelines, people bump into each other and get hurt or worse..

When the Lord presents the Israelites with the commandments, it's like Angus lining up the costume eye holes with James' eyes so he can now enjoy the evening's fun. The commandments are a gift given by the Lord who know us all too well and loves us still and always. The Law of God "is not a burden placed on us by an oppressive taskmaster. It is a gift given to promote life, life with God, and life with one another."² Just like children, WE still need boundaries, WE still need the guidance of someone more knowledgeable, WE still need the wisdom of One who has the big picture and is committed to the well-being of all. That's what God's commandments provided for the Israelites and for us so that each person could live freely and fully and the community would be a place of mutual love and safety.

In our reading today, the Israelites are on the edge of the Promised Land. The generation who grew up in the wilderness are about to enter a different place, with it's own challenges and temptations. Moses, who will not accompany them into Canaan, is desperate for them to always remember that the commandments for a good and God-pleasing life remain the same, no matter where you live. He wants them to always remember that they came from a God who not only made a covenant with their ancestors but with them as well and their children as well and us as well. Moses wants them to remember the power and mercy of the One who gave the commandments and to remember it was this same God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, provided for them in the desert and will lead them into a homeland. He wants them to remember the commandments were given as a life-giving gift and we show our love to the Giver of that gift by obeying them, by loving God and our neighbor with all that we are.

“You want to know how to live as a free people?” Moses says to the Israelites and us. He answers by repeating the 10 commandment received at Mt. Sinai. “All these “do not’s” are about freedom?”, we humans have questioned forever. Yes, they are! Hear them in a different way. To live free, you put God first and have only one God. You respect God and enjoy and rest with God. Care for the vulnerable and respect life. Keep your commitments and live honestly. Speak truthfully and be content.³ Who wouldn’t want to live in a place where those standards were the rule? It would be a place where everyone was freed from fear and need, freed from the burden of protecting and comparing, freed to trust and flourish with mutual support and encouragement. Freed to stop running into trees and causing senseless pain.

Hear, learn, observe this way of life laid out at Sinai. Hear, learn, observe the way of life summarized by Jesus: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The rules for life given to us at Sinai and again by Jesus are not simply a list of does but God’s way of transforming us and the world. Practicing God’s commands are a way of life, a way we become the children of God we are born and baptized to be. Practicing God’s way of life will not only guide our behavior but change who we are from the inside out. Living the commandments grows in us the knowing of whose we are and what is important to God so that we are able to discern what is right, good and life-giving in the small and big decisions of life. And when we trip or fail because who we’re trying to be doesn’t align with our Child of God eyes, God is there to pick us up with forgiveness — not so we get up and do it again, running into a box elder tree rather than a maple. God’s forgiveness is the gift of strength to learn, to realign our eyes again with Jesus’ and reclaim the freedom of God’s way of living.

Linda M Alessandri 10/10/15

ENDNOTES

1.As cited by Rev. Dr. Debra Samuelson in “The Problem with Box Elder Trees” as posed on <http://day1.org>

2.Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 5: 1-22; 6: 4-9” as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

3.”10 ways to live as free people” posted on Narrative Lectionary Study Group on Facebook.