

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 22-23, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 22: 19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16: 13-20

Preacher: Margot Van Etten

Today's readings—one so familiar, the other less so—pose a challenge. A few challenges, actually.

The passage from Isaiah has a certain contemporary ring. Faced with disaster from a besieging Assyrian army surrounding Jerusalem, with internal chaos and decay, what does Shebna—the nation's second most powerful man—do? How does he advise his king, heal his nation, serve his God? By continuing to siphon money into his own coffers; by erecting an elaborate tomb such as a king would construct to memorialize himself, and by riding around in the splendor of his ostentatiously gilded chariot. He is the very image of the official who perverts his position.

God responds, through Isaiah, by proclaiming, “you’re fired.” Shebna’s replacement has been chosen and anointed, given the keys to the kingdom and control over access to the king. He will open and shut the doors of power. Meanwhile, Shebna’s corruption will earn him exile, poverty and shame.

We are more familiar with the Gospel passage—so often cited as a proof text for the primacy of Peter and the authority of the Papacy. But what does it say to *us* in our own lives? And what does this combination of readings offer? Especially now?

I keep coming back to the images of keys, of binding and loosing, opening and closing doors. Herein lies the news we can use in our own lives, here and now.

Peter has just recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the Divine Son, through a moment of graced insight. This is the Rock of faith upon which Jesus will build his church which at this moment Peter comes to represent. And the Church is the People of God. And we are the People who receive the authority and responsibility to bind and to loose. To open and shut doors.

So what or who are we supposed to bind or loose? Which doors do we open or shut? Looking back to Jesus’ opening mission statement, in the Synagogue at Nazareth, when he read from Isaiah: “...to proclaim good news to the poor...to bind up the brokenhearted...proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners... to comfort those who mourn...”

So for you, the People of God, in this time and place, within pandemic and protest we are to bind up wounds, to comfort the afflicted and broken hearted, to free the oppressed ... To

proclaim mercy. Not just in words, but in actions, by extending our care and concern, however possible.

During this time I have seen it in so many places.

Early in the shutdown, some younger friends of mine offered to get me food—and did—driving 40 minutes beyond the time it took to shop to deliver it to my house and stuff my freezer.

People in my neighborhood posting online offers to run errands for anyone who needed help, friend and stranger alike.

People in my parish offering to become “phone buddies” to folks who didn’t have electronic means to keep in touch with the world or had no one to talk to.

A friend—let’s call her “Phoebe” getting up in the middle of the night to drive her 90-year-old neighbor with coronary symptoms to the hospital and then caring for the woman’s elderly dog while she waited not only for her neighbor to come home, but for the results of that neighbor’s Covid test.

People of all ages and races marching and attending rallies, braving the pandemic to loose the chains from Black lives that haven’t mattered nearly enough in our country...

It is easy these days to feel like the people in the Jerusalem of our first reading, besieged with catastrophe all around them and seeing only corruption and greed instead of help and hope. But after watching all the People of God—those who know themselves to be such and those who without thinking in such terms are carrying on the work of God’s mercy—I am filled with hope. More: I am inspired.

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. We are called to be beacons of that light, heralds of that mercy, binding wounds and loosing chains of fear, isolation, or oppression to the people around us. We are called to do it with whatever tools we have, virtually or in person. We have been entrusted with the keys, and with the power to use them.