**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Pentecost 9C, Proper 14

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

### Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24 Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 Luke 12:32-40

### *Do not be afraid, little flock.*

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We can’t have a reference to the iconic sin capital cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and just let it slide. At the very least it causes us to overlook Isaiah’s message about unbridled sin and a complete rupture from God’s love. God has been mourning the loss of his people, but now God is answering grievous sin with massive justice. The sins are worshipping idols, prostitution in the temples, greed, cruelty, oppression of and injustice against the weak, sacrificing to demons, .… you get it – doing everything possible to deny any shred of decency. As Isaiah says, the peoples’ hands are covered with the blood of their sins.

Here's the two-minute version of the story we’ve heard. And, get this, this story first appears in the Book of Genesis. In the beginning, people began creating quite a mess for themselves. Go to chapter 18: Three angels visit Abraham, the 99-year-old husband of 90-year-old Sarah and announce that the two will be ancestors of multitudes. After they stop laughing, the angels share the further purpose of their visit – destroying both Sodom and Gomorrah because their sins have led to their destruction. Abraham accompanies the angels to direct them on their way to Sodom where they will stay with Abraham’s nephew, Lot.

This is where the story has twisted into one condemning homosexuality. Remember, the fates of the two cities are sealed before the angels arrive. The out-of-control crowd demands that Lot toss the three visitors to them so they can rape them. Vowed to the essential social practice of hospitality, as we have been hearing over the last weeks, Lot refuses, protecting his guests. But he offers his daughters instead, and the mob rejects the offer. They are after violence. They are after rape and cruelty and murder. They are not looking for loving partnerships. And Lot’s offering of his daughters gives us a clear idea of their status in that society. I don’t hear uproars from “good Christians” about that.

With that behind us, Isaiah lays out God’s disgust at the history of despicable behavior. He is Eliza Doolittle on an unimaginable scale: Words, words, words, I’m so sick of words! End your hypocritical sacrifices, stop trampling my temple with your evil, I will have it no more! I will hear you no more!

They have finally earned God’s complete rejection. God pulls the curtain on their bloody show of phony honor and love and responds with absolute rejection. Rejection.

You ask the love of your life out to dinner. You are rejected. You are in silent, deep, aloneness.

Imagine that at a cosmic scale. Rejection. Desolation.

Yet even at the 11th hour, God offers reconciliation:

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!

Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: **Engage with me, people!**

though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah still had a choice. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah chose otherwise. We always have a choice. And *our* choices are enhanced by the words of Jesus Christ.

Do not be afraid, little flock. It is hard to hang onto this short sentence. Our lives are so different from what we once thought was normal. There are new job titles for new jobs: Director of Heart; Head of People. Wherever Team Leader. One company has an online employee store where remote workers can order things like stand-up desks for their homes. The virtual world and physical world merge in strange ways, and it is unsettling. Are we in a recession, or not? If we have 500,000 new hires in July, why is inflation still crazy? And it’s crazy globally. Job statistics show some proof of the craziness: there are now 600,000 more warehouse workers and 90,000 fewer daycare workers. You can earn $75,000 to $95,000 a year as an electro-mechanical technician or technologist, whatever that is. And worst, we don’t know what will happen in our government, our environment, our work lives. Routines must always be flexible. Life is not predictable.

The trouble is, we can’t control everything the way we want to. We never could. Having control of everything is an illusion that is very satisfying. Uh-oh! That illusion has burst. Poof!

Do not be afraid. The full sentence is the good news, and it defines and slices religious beliefs. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. The Greek used makes it clear that the giving of the realm of God has already occurred. It is ours. In the here and now, and not just in the sweet by-and-by. Some people live their lives earning the realm. Good deed 1, clink, in the heaven bank. Good deed 2, clink in the heaven bank. A lifetime of good deeds will earn me my place in heaven – clink, clink, clink – later. Other people realize that God has already acted, has already given us the kingdom. The realm of God and of Jesus is ours today. We celebrate. We live in thanksgiving! We know that despite the hardships, we have a joy of unity and peace and serenity. This miasma we call life may be unsettling because we are not running the show. But the breath of God can clear our views, refresh us with the pristine air of God’s love and embrace. We are people of thanksgiving for a gift already provided, not people who feel we must sacrifice goats and bulls to earn our way to God. God is here. In thanksgiving, we cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow, protect the environment, vote for social good and strong economic policy, take action to maintain our relationships with the Holy. Our bonds to God, of whatever name, is not a nickel and dime operation. It is a life’s work of gratitude. Not surprisingly, *Eucharist* translates to *thanksgiving* in English. It strengthens our understanding and propels our grateful actions.

Last week, Artis Lee Chism died at the age of 81, in Bellevue Nebraska. Friends of mine made the eight-hour drive for her funeral. Her obituary was remarkably simple. Born. Died. Predeceased by husband Edward, by son. Mother of other sons and daughters-in-law, grandchildren, great grandchildren. A life. But her funeral told her story.

It was two hours long and many of those she loved told of that great love. Most everyone was surprised to learn her name was Artis. She had so many other names: Her kids called her mom and mama, but her friends knew her as Idie, Miss Ida, Miss Idie, and Ma Chism. Ma absorbed people into her family like the blob that ate Pittsburgh. You show up, she sizes you up, you are hers. Person after person talked of her love, her direction, her cooking and your place at her table. They talked of her guidance, her gentle firmness, her ability to let doctors know what would go with her and what would not. She was fearless. Above all, she loved. She protected her own and she protected the lonely. Forty years later, my friends talked about meeting her when they were stationed at the Air Force base where her husband was based, and how she helped them manage a major move with a four-year-old boy and six-month-old baby girl. She and Ed taught them to be good spouses, good parents, and loving friends. The Bellevue News showed that she was the matriarch of a good-sized family, and she was the matriarch of an extended and extending family worldwide. Ma Chism lived her love with warm embraces, encouragement, good cooking, and laughter. Because of Ma Chism, I’ve been absorbed into her adopted family myself. Ma Chism lived with love and resolve, with standards and without fear. She knew who she was and she knew, and told you, whose she was. She now rests in peace in the perfected realm, whatever that might be. May she rise in glory.

Our Gospel continues with the story of alert slaves who are ready at all hours. That encourages me to live my faith always. Ma Chism shows me how to do it, not out of vigilance, but out of love.

Bless Ma Chism. And thanks be to God.