**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Pentecost 14A, September 3, 2023

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 16:21-28

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
   be acceptable to you,  
   O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 19: 14

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Happy Labor Day Weekend! We acknowledge the hard work and achievements of America’s Workers in general and union labor in particular for their contributions to the US economy and way of life. With more than 100 years of this labor celebration, the original purpose – celebrating advances in employment conditions, safety, wages, and humane hours **and** the positive influence these have had on US manufacturing growth – can be obscured by the call of picnics and beaches and half-price mattress sales. Let us pray in thanksgiving for American labor.

***Pause.***

I also want to address the obvious – my sitting in this wheelchair. My vacation has a multi-layered blessing—as my joyful article in the Newsletter describes—until it wasn’t. My troublesome hip gave up completely several days into the fun, and I road a transit wheelchair through the generous kindness and muscle of my dear friend. She’s a saint, but I want to talk about something more.

Over 50 years ago, I was a first year teacher in the poorest school district in the Bronx. Poorer than Mississippi schools. Black kids disappeared and their story never made it to the New York times, although missing white kids would appear on the covers. One of our third graders was an alcoholic. One of my students fell and her knees became so infected an aide had to take her to the free clinic; her mother was a single sex worker who didn’t have the wherewithal to notice, let alone intervene. My dad died, and my 22 year old psyche couldn’t handle the combination. Like Simone Biles, I had to leave the profession I had dreamed about to save my mental health. I resigned. In April, just two months short of a successfully completed year.

This does relate to St. David’s. There was a boy named Juan Rodrigues in my class of seven year olds. His mother had died when he was four and he was being raised by his grandmother. When he was six, his grandmother died, and he was passed on to his aunt and uncle. He was a confused, very sweet, innocent seven year old when I met him, and the losses had taken a toll in every way. He attached himself to me like a Florida chigger to a warm leg. So when I resigned I was plagued with guilt about Juan. About how this third unexpected loss would leave him. Since I was gone, I never knew.

When my hip began to give up, I resolved to continue here at St. David’s until your rector surfaced. You had had enough with transient pastors. I did physical therapy but it worsened the pain and my therapist agreed that I should stop. Then the pain became too great to walk across a room and the result is this chair, a *real* wheelchair, a successor to the transit chair to allow more independent mobility.

It appears that I have a surprised, hotly avoided disruption to my work with you. I will find out on September 12 when my replacement surgery will occur. Then I will learn when my return is possible. My intent is to return, to be among you again.

I don’t intend to be maudlin here. I realize the difference, in my head, between little Juan Rodriguez and the members of St. David’s. But the impact is similar. In each case, I did my best. In each case, God had other plans.

Our readings from Exodus and Matthew today each show plans interrupted, changes of plans and bumps in the road in God’s work, no matter who does it.

Moses had escaped a murder rap in Egypt and was quietly minding sheep for his father-in-law. He saw his life as one of fields and pastures and children of his own. His bad hip was spectacular: a bush burning riotously but not burning up. Of course he had to look at it. Not a cloud in the sky to suggest it had been hit by lightning. And a voice rises from it, calling his name! It is the Lord, asking him to return to Egypt to lead the Jews out of enslavement. Who, me? Moses replies. I don’t think so, Lord. How on earth can I go back? What would I say to Pharoah, who I betrayed, or the Jews, who knew me as a big deal in the Pharoah’s house and **then** as a murderer of one of the Pharoah’s overseers?

God replied, “I’ve got this, Moses. I’ll be with you. As to the Jews, say you were sent by “I AM”, the all and all, the great lord of their ancestors. Moses, we’ll work it out. You have to trust me.”

When we move to the Gospel, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the terrifying future in Jerusalem. They don’t see it coming. The gospels have all been carrying a not-very-subtle subtext: the Pharisees and Sadducees, like Caiaphas, and Jewish puppet king Herod are threatened and terrified that Jesus will disrupt their uneasy relationship with Rome. The dangers of Jerusalem have been foreshadowed with a heavy handedness giving layer upon layer of constant criticism by these groups, threats, and even attempts on Jesus’s life.

Jesus has now set up the future of his movement, naming Peter, Petros, the rock on whom he will build his church. Petra is the word for a foundation boulder. And in this Gospel Peter has apparently risen to what he believes a foundation boulder for a movement should do: protect Jesus at all costs. Peter still believes that Jesus will overcome the Romans and the injustice of the Jews leadership. Peter still believes that Jesus will ride to glory. These beliefs are Peter’s bad hip, Peter’s expectations created in him a view of the future that does NOT include suffering and death for Jesus or for anyone else. It does not include a Jesus who lives his word, who exhorts his followers as clearly as Paul does in his letter to the Roman Jewish and Gentile Christians, a Jesus who will live his teachings truly, fully, and with absolute integrity until the very end, an end of crucifixion and death. Peter’s bad hip causes him to overlook Jesus’s promise of resurrection. It causes Peter to take Jesus 22…. aside and begin to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

Jesus rebukes Peter, the hoped-for new foundation stone, as being a stumbling block, the opposite of his call by Jesus. Look at the two men, talking off to the side. Look at the **shock** on Peter’s face, and on the face of Jesus, as the dawn breaks for each of them: How can we be so far apart after all this time, and when it matters the most?

Jesus does what he always does. He goes back to the beginning of his work, the beginning of his message, his way of life: This is not about glory and earthly power. This is about humility and servitude, and generosity of heart and soul and mind and strength. This is about letting go of the distractions of power. This is about integrity, of commitment to the Spirit of God and love of one another, including our enemies. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Dear Peter, his bad hip is a dream of a future that is not realistic, given the evil and power-hunger of the world. It is a dream that distracts him from Jesus’s call to be beyond this world; to grow in grace and connection to God and one another.

Our bad hips can disrupt the lives we expect to lead. They can cause us suffering and pain. They can be a real pain in the butt and distraction from God’s call for us to live in the way of Christ, with integrity, through whatever is before us. They can remind us that, with God’s help, we will not lose our ways. We *can* pick up the hardship at hand, the cross or the wheelchair or the systems of government we battle, or the deaths of loved ones, and follow Jesus, and be supported by Jesus, through it all.

Thanks be to God.