



“STRANGERS IN A FOREIGN LAND”

Hebrews 11-3, 8-16

Lectionary 19 C

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Our Saviour Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

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It is August 10, 258 A.D. in the city of Rome. The Roman emperor Valerian has summoned a Christian by the name of Lawrence to appear before him. The emperor was suspicious of this strange religious sect. Like many emperors before him, he regarded them as a threat to the empire. He hopes that his brutal and systematic persecution would silence them forever.

As the chief deacon of the church in Rome, Lawrence was ordered by Emperor Valerian to turn over all the gold, silver, jewels and other such valuables of the church to the empire. He was determined to crush the Christians.

But where was the treasure? Valerian wanted to see the gold, silver and jewels. He didn't see any. He demanded to know where it was. However, Lawrence just stood there unmoved by the demands of the most powerful man on earth.

“Where are your treasures? Where is the gold and silver I asked for?”

Lawrence slowly turned and raised his arm pointing to the ragamuffin bunch of peasants around him, the poor, the sick and the widowed. “These, dear emperor, are the treasures of the church. We have sold all our gold, silver and jewels so that we could care for these, the true treasure of the church.”

Valerian was furious. He would not tolerate such disobedience. He would make an example of Lawrence. He had Lawrence bound to a gridiron, a griddle, in the center of Rome for all to see. Then he ordered Lawrence . . . to be slowly roasted and then burned alive.

But Lawrence would have the last word! His response was unforgettable. It only enhanced the reputation of the Christians. He did not resist or cry for mercy. He accepted his death with joy, with a prayer on his lips, forgiving his enemies. He had no desire to hold on to his life in this world because he was on his way to his true home. Lawrence died as he had lived his life. He was a . . .

STRANGER IN A FOREIGN LAND.

Such stories of martyrdom are moving and heroic . . . but hardly seem to connect to our lives today. Few of us are afraid of being burned alive because we go to church and call ourselves Christian. We are comfortable with our lives in this world. We are content with life in affluent America. We hardly feel like strangers in a foreign land.

Yet that is the image used by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in today's Second Reading to describe the Christian life. We live in a world in which we are never quite at home. As aliens and foreigners on this earth, we long for something better, for a "better country, that is, a heavenly one." We trust the promise of God that in spite of how good or bad our life may be in this world, the best is yet to come.

Being a **stranger in a foreign land** means that no one owns us but God. It means that we are free to leave behind all that this world thinks is important. We are never completely at home in this world because ultimately we are defined by the promises of God . . . and not the promises of our wallet.

Hebrews 11 offers a long list of **strangers and foreigners** who lived in this world by faith and not by sight, who were willing to leave the past behind trusting that the future was in the hands of God. Today's second lesson cites two of these **strangers in a foreign land**, Abraham and Sarah. In spite of the evidence to the contrary, they trusted the promises of God. Abraham was a successful nomad, comfortable grazing his flocks in the land of Haran. He was making a good living. Yet, "out of the blue" God interrupts his life and offers him a promise of a land that he could call his own, many children, many descendants, as numerous as the stars of the heaven, and that through them he would bless the universe. Abraham miraculously trusted this "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He left Haran behind trusting God to lead him to the land of the promise.

Other **strangers in a foreign land** were to follow, such as Lawrence, burned alive, embracing his future, trusting "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

There was that carpenter's son from Nazareth by the name of Jesus. His life ended alone, abandoned by his friends, hated by his enemies, hanging on a cross. Yet, nevertheless, in spite of evidence to the contrary, he trusts his Father, his daddy, his Abba, and utters, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

And not one of these **strangers** was let down by God. Even Jesus, who died a most despised and humiliating death, on the third day was raised again from the dead. God was determined that nothing would thwart the fulfillment of his promise, not even the death of his own son.

Even though Julie lived in Phoenix, twice a year she would make the journey to Indianapolis to visit her grandparents. When Julie came to visit them for the first time, she noticed how strange their house was. It was not at all like the houses she knew in Phoenix. There all the houses were built on slabs. But under her Indianapolis grandparents' house was this strange and subterranean world called . . . "the basement!"

At first, Julie was afraid of the basement. She would only go down there when the lights were on and her grandpa was with her. The presence of the light and her grandpa took away her fear. Over the years, she learned to love to play in the basement, but always with the lights on and in the presence of grandpa. As long as she could see grandpa, she was happy.

But one summer evening something strange and terrible happened. There was a thunderstorm while Julie played in the basement. The winds blew. The thunder rumbled. The lightning flashed. The lights went out. There was total darkness. Julie was terrified. She had visions of goblins and monsters coming out of the darkness. Here she was in a strange city, in a foreign, dark place, and she couldn't see the one thing that made her feel safe: her grandpa!

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" she cried. "Where are you? I can't see you. Where are you?" tears streaming down her cheeks.

Then she heard the voice for which she was longing. "Julie! Here! I'm over here! This is grandpa. Don't be afraid."

Even though Julie could see nothing in the darkness, she recognized the voice of grandpa, the voice of the one she always knew she could trust. She was unafraid. Julie believed, in spite of appearances to the contrary, with "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Then suddenly she felt the firm grasp of someone on her arm. She knew that it was no goblin or monster poised to drag her off into the horror of this basement cave. Because of that familiar and reassuring voice, she knew that this was the hand of grandpa.

So also for us! At the heart and center of our life together in this community is the promise spoken by Jesus' very own Pappa. As we stumble through this troubling world, even as we are lost and confused in the basement, afraid of what might happen to us, we hear the comforting promise of the Gospel: "This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you. You are my beloved sons and daughters, numbered with the saints of every time and place." Because of this promise we will be forever **strangers in a foreign land**, never quite at home in this world, always on the way to the place that Christ has prepared for us.

In today's Gospel, we catch a glimpse of what life is like for **strangers** like us. We can see this world for what it truly is, filled with thieves who will rob us, moths that will destroy us and treasure that will rot. Blessed with such wisdom, we can dare to live with a freedom this world will never understand. We don't need to hoard and accumulate. We can live generously giving our lives away to those whom St. Lawrence insisted were the most valuable people in this world: the poor and marginalized, the classmate everyone loves to bully, the odd couple down the street that no one would ever take out for a cup of coffee, the abused and neglected children of this community for whom no one has time.

When we leave this place and walk out onto that parking lot and our unpredictable lives beyond, we see a country divided between Red states and Blue states. Accusations of racism and shouts of patriotism create a noise that is confusing and threatening. We fear for the future of our country. However, we do not have to worry about where we are headed.

Like Lawrence and Abraham and Sarah and all the saints and martyrs that have gone before us, Jesus promises *to them and all of us* "Have no fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

In the meantime, that makes all the difference in the world in how we live our lives. We are free to listen, engage, speak and act with humility and confidence, always seeking to do what is right and true. We are strangers in a foreign land who pray . . .

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.