

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Proper 7**  
**Year A**

**Preparing for Eternal Glory**  
**[RCL] Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39**

In today's gospel, Jesus instructs his apostles about the cost of discipleship. Christianity just is not an easy life, he seems to say. In fact, you may be handed over to councils who will flog you, dragged before governors and kings, betrayed by your family, and hated by all because of the very name of Jesus.

Who wants that, we wonder? Seriously, what kind of Sunday message is it to hear “children will rise against parents and have them put to death”?

Now that Jesus has their attention—and ours—he goes on to say some things that have more comfort value. Do not fear death, for the forces of evil may kill the mortal body but they cannot kill the soul.

And that beautiful, poetic image: the sparrow, worth half a cent, is cared for and loved by God. Every sparrow. And every hair on your head.

In this bizarrely contrasting narrative, Jesus lays out two fundamental principles of Christianity: First, we are not spared from suffering, and, second, when we suffer God suffers along with us. Let's examine those two basic tenets of the Christian life, shall we?

First, suffering: we may not be flogged before governors or hated by everyone—but we do struggle, right? We contract diseases, grieve the death of loved ones, lose jobs, and undergo a myriad of nasty experiences—some trivial, and some catastrophic.

And part of what Jesus seems to be saying in this passage—in his own exaggerated manner of polemical hyperbole—is that we will most probably continue to suffer. The Christian life is not a magic fix to the woes of this mortal life.

If it were, we would not have the manifestation of any evil or hate in the world. Instead, everything would just be lovely.

Imagine: No mass murder of Coptic Christian children in Egypt. No Manchester bombing. No killings in Paris, Ferguson, Orlando, Boston, Charleston, or Newtown.

And as beautiful a picture as that might be, it is a picture of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, what we hope and pray for, what Jesus came to earth to proclaim was coming, and—let’s face it—what is not yet here.

So how are we to live in this world where hate and violence are so rampant?

We need the help of God.

And that’s the second point: our God is with us. “He shall be called Emmanuel, God with us”—remember that from Christmas? The promise made by Jesus is that we are *not* alone in our struggles. God is here, to comfort us, to help us through the difficult times, to show us the way when we don’t know where to turn, to help us when we cannot help ourselves—and certainly to rejoice with us in good times.

We will sometimes suffer in this mortal life, but God is with us—to comfort and guide us.

Perhaps we might think of these two things when we consider the many current controversies that we seem to be entwined in—in the church, in our nation, maybe even in our families and communities.

Voices on both sides of every issue want *resolution*—they want to be *out* of the struggle. And they seek to do this by legislative action, human edict, and having one winner—all based on contradictory interpretations of the same text or tenet.

But could it be that no less than our Lord and Savior, that God-made-human, Jesus Christ is calling us not to make an *end* to our struggle, but to be *in the midst* of it?

And could it be that, once we accept our place in the very midst of it, the Holy Spirit could show us the way forward?

That’s, at least, how Jesus seems to imagine it. Oh, we all have opinions of our own—make no mistake about that. But we must be interested in opposing views—hearing them *and* respecting them. We must not dare to presume that our view is *the right* view—or the *only* view.

Time was when we Episcopalians lived like that. We were respectful and polite. We listened to each other. Sure, we didn’t agree on every issue, but we agreed to continue in conversation.

Nowadays, we in the church sometimes take ourselves too seriously. We imagine and presume that our debates and legislative actions will somehow bring about—or perhaps even *prevent*—the salvation of the world.

It's really odd, when you think about it. God-fearing people of every political stripe and theological persuasion—faithful, caring, loving people—presume to know the mind of God, in painful detail and with absolute certainty. Or, worse yet, they have decided to take over sovereignty from God.

This is not our calling as Christian people, dear friends. Oh, we will have struggles and issues—every age has its own set of these. And the God-made-human we worship calls us to be *in the midst* of the struggles of this world.

In our struggles, we are called not to engage in a fight to the finish, in which one group winds up the victorious insiders and other the dejected outsiders. But to proclaim to everyone on God's green earth that God is here, in the midst of us. And to share with every human being—our fellow pilgrims on the journey—the love that we have known in Christ Jesus.

Because every human heart has the capacity to love *and* the capacity to hate.

So, what helps keep us on the path of righteousness? What will help tip the balance for good over evil? What can we do to overcome the negative instincts we all have to some extent?

Listen for the still, small voice of God.

The God who was with the infant Isaac, who grew into a great patriarch for God's chosen people.

The God who keeps watch over our lives, as the Psalmist tells us.

The God who will reunite us all in a resurrection like his, as we read in the letter to the Romans.

And the God-made-human who came to earth to proclaim that love is stronger than death. For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered. These spiritual truths will be revealed to *all* in God's good time.

What you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops:

- Jesus Christ is risen from the dead,
- the kingdom of God has come very near us, and
- when we suffer—and we will—we have the church, the Christian community where we “bear one another's burdens,” as St. Paul said (Galatians 6:2).

And, again from Paul, “this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

In this Christian life, we are not spared from suffering, but when we suffer, God suffers along with us. And this suffering helps prepare us for eternal glory.

*The Rev. Barrie Bates has served Anglican and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past 20+ years. He holds a Ph.D. in liturgical studies, and memberships in the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Screen Actors' Guild. Other than ordained ministry, his interests include opera, fine dining, and boating.*

*Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*