



Water on the Rock

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
Psalm 112; Hebrew 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14: August 30, 2020*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

Last week my family and I went to the North Shore. We were staying high up in the Lutsen Mountains, but from our room we could see that hundreds of feet down, deep in the trees, was a river rushing over the rocks that you could hear from our room. When we drove down to the shore of Lake Superior, we also heard the crashing of the waves in a lake so vast it acts like an ocean. Countless small and large creeks rushed from the ridges above the lake, in land that was carved by ancient glaciers and volcanoes. Water, and the sound of it, was everywhere.

And as we spent time there, I began to see how tightly my spirit has been wound up. In the presence of the vastness of forest and the sound of water and the silence, which are intrinsically healing to me, I realized how much silence I have needed. What has been happening in this world is deeply disturbing. In spite of the unearned safety I have because of privilege that I know many people lack through no fault of

their own, I have still felt the strain of these times greatly, more than I knew. And it was the presence of the quiet, and the contrast from the noise and violence in our civic life, that showed this to me.

It's tempting to want to throw civilization out the window and just move to the woods. I posted quite a few photos and videos of my time up north on Facebook, and Diane Erdmann commented that it was going to be hard for us to come back, and in a way she was right. There is such beauty there, and endless opportunities to be physically active and breathe the scent of the forest and live simply. But wouldn't you know it, even up there, there is strife. We were driving in the hills above Grand Marais, and saw a sign in someone's yard that said "Trump / Pence 2020". Across the street was another house with a sign that said "Biden / Harris 2020: Save Our Democracy." This was a perfect picture of the negative polarity in our country right now. So even in the north woods, you can't escape our times entirely.

One can take refuge working tirelessly for justice and for systemic change, and indeed the St. John's Justice & Service committee and Racial Equity Teams are launching a massive get out the vote campaign because voting is an important part of living our faith in the world. You'll get more information about that soon. But even working for justice we can't escape the strain. Most of us have people we love who deeply support whoever you call the enemy. Things could get worse before they get better. When I got back from the

North Shore I got caught up with the news and saw the video of Jacob Blake being shot in the back, and heard of the subsequent unrest and violence in Kenosha and in Minneapolis, and I was anguished again. And I know all of you have similar stories of fatigue and anguish and strain. In addition to all this toxicity our personal lives also continue, with whatever we carry there. We deeply need both rest and refreshment, and also strength to continue to live in a healing way in this world.

So in the midst of all this, what is our compass and our hope?

Today's epistle reading is from the book of Hebrews. That was a letter written to a Christian community that was deeply discouraged. The kingdom of God couldn't have felt further away. It was a time of suffering and great persecution in the first century after Jesus' life. Rome had begun to pay attention to this new Jewish sect, these people who simply called themselves the Way, and had begun to persecute them terribly. Throughout this letter to the Hebrews, the writer is encouraging the Christians to persevere, to not lose hope. The writer tells the great stories of the saints of times past, who endured so much because they saw something that kept them faithful. And at the end of this letter, in today's reading, the writer just encourages the Christians to continue to love. To show hospitality to strangers. To remember those in prison and those who were being tortured. To do good and share what they have. In the midst of tremendously difficult times, they were still being encouraged not only to survive

but to have character, to do good, and to resist evil. To not block themselves off from others, but to love and share and have compassion and be mindful of those who were especially suffering. And Jesus, in today's Gospel reading, encourages his followers as usual to turn the values of the world upside down. He encourages people to be humble and not to seek positions of honor. Our scriptures constantly paint a picture of a world radically different than the dominant narrative around us.

And this beautiful different way, this beautiful Way of Love, is our refuge, and also our work. My friends, I'd like to invite us all to take a very big collective deep breath. Please become aware of the level of strain you personally are experiencing. We, the people of God, need encouragement. Do you know that no matter what horrors are going on in the world, that you are a beautiful and beloved child of God, and nothing can change that—neither systemic racism nor white supremacy nor COVID-19 nor the narcissist bullying of our President nor anything else that is troubling you? In the reading from Hebrews, we hear God saying, I will never leave you nor forsake you. And in a world gone mad, the writer says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

At Gooseberry Falls northeast of Two Harbors, there are huge slabs of rock in the river that are exposed this time of year. My daughter Carly and I spent hours climbing over those rocks. They are shaped beautifully by the endless movement of water over them. The Way of Love is like that water. Next

to rock, water seems powerless. But over time, water can wear a hole in rock. I'd like to invite you all to see those things that you feel most hopeless or the most angry about in your lives and in our world. It might be mental illness in your family. It might be your loved ones who continue to support this dangerous cultural shift toward xenophobia and white supremacy. It might be our continued overuse of fossil fuels and the earth's resources in a way that threatens the climate and ecosystems of this beautiful earth. It might be the increasing hatred and vitriol in our public conversation. Those things might seem strong and immovable as the rock below Gooseberry Falls. Now realize how tightly you are wound up about these things, and allow God's Spirit to breathe healing and gentleness into your system, and to free you from the way our culture is talking about these things. Allow God's Spirit to flow through you like water over the rock, and infuse you with the gentle reminder that evil does not have the last word, and that you can live differently. With God's help, following Jesus, you can resist the paradigms of dominance that are everywhere, and instead hold on to the rhythms of a different way of life.

This will take discipline, and intention, and a surrender to the presence of God. This is more than a sprint and it's more than a marathon. It's a way of life we are undertaking for the long haul. My friends, even if we can't meet in our building and be nourished in that way, we can still be nourished through our communion with one another and with God. So here is a practical way to experience this. I'd like to invite you to take

your bulletin, which you can click on below the video of today's service, and slowly read each of the scriptures and each of the songs in today's service. Please pay attention to the phrases that especially stands out to you as offering a healing alternative to the madness around us. Here are some:

Teach us how to love each other
Lift us to the joy divine

They will not be afraid of any evil rumors;
they put their trust in God.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Light dawns, love grows, hope blooms in a weary world.

I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Whatever most stands out to you as a healing alternative to what is around us, consider printing that phrase out or drawing it with colors on a beautiful piece of paper and taping it to your bathroom mirror or the dashboard of your car or your kitchen refrigerator. Or listen to the music on your headphones during your morning walk. Then ask God's Spirit to infuse your entire being with this healing alternative to what is going on around us. Have the courage to gently and steadfastly resist the narratives of death that you encounter around you and within you. Let this be to you like water over

the rock, singing a healing sound to you, smoothing out what is rough and inviting you to walk through all that is happening in the world, knowing that you are also walking through and embodying the kingdom of God. Let the gentle strength of God's kingdom, the gentle strength of the Way of love, permeate your thoughts and habits and words this week. For God has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. Amen.