Gratitude Sunday

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
November 13, 2022; Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

It has been said that people can withstand almost any condition if you have a strong enough "why." On October 12, 2019, one of the world's greatest runners Eliud Kipchoge accomplished his goal of being the first human in history to run a marathon in under 2 hours, which is a pace of 4:34 per mile for 26.2 His attempt was in Vienna and so I set my alarm for 3am to wake up to see the last 15 minutes or so of his marathon on TV, wondering if he would be able to do what was deemed humanly impossible. He made it with twenty seconds to spare and it was exhilarating. He said that he did it to inspire other human beings to dare impossible things. In another awesome feat, our own Peter Clayburgh's friend Andrew Towne was one of the six men who accomplished what called the "Impossible Row". They took 12 days to row 600 miles, using only human power, across the Drake Passage between Antarctica and South America, which has some of the most violent ocean conditions in the world. Viktor Frankl, the Jew who wrote of his experience surviving Auschwitz, said that inmate doctors in Auschwitz noticed a pattern of people dying very quickly when they lost hope of reuniting with their families, whereas some of those who still found reason to hope stayed alive under the same terrible conditions.

I know that these are extreme examples outside our experience. But if you think about your own life with courageous honesty, you will remember times when you gave up because things were impossible, and perhaps also times when you felt compelled to continue against all odds for some reason that meant enough to you to help you keep going.

Our scriptures from today paint a starkly contrasting pair of pictures about endurance and about hope. In the reading from the prophet Isaiah, the prophet is speaking words of comfort and a vision for hope to a people who had suffered in captivity and exile a long time. The people of Israel had been taken as slaves to Babylon and forced to serve others—to build nice houses they would never live in, to grow lush gardens whose produce they would never eat, like so many of the world's poor have done from the beginning of time. To give these suffering people hope, the prophet paints a beautiful picture that seems absolutely impossible. The wolf will lie down with the lamb, the lion will eat hay like the ox, and they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. This sounds like an impossible fairy tale—and if we only believed it could be true, we'd probably give almost anything to make it happen. The other picture from today's scripture is the one that Jesus paints, which is the opposite. He describes the destruction of Israel's beautiful Temple, famines and earthquakes, hostility and persecution and murder. As I read Jesus' words this week, when he described that the Temple would be utterly thrown down with not one stone left on the other, I had an immediate memory of 9/11, watching the Towers come down in an instant.

With the endless hurricanes of today, and famine in many places including Kenya where Mark Lindberg just visited, and shootings and violence, Jesus' picture sounds much more realistic.

But that last thing he says moves me greatly. Although he had just said that some would be killed, he goes on to say that not a hair on your heads will be lost, and that by your endurance you will save your souls.

This quality of endurance that Jesus describes means steadfastly moving toward a goal. As I said at the beginning, human beings can withstand almost anything if they have a strong enough "why". It is very poignant that in the gospel reading from today, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem for the very last time, having set his face toward ultimate truth-telling and confrontation with the religious authorities of his time. Although they killed him for it, he showed the world the new beginnings the Spirit of God can bring out of any and all circumstances. The mystery we call the resurrection of Jesus which all of his followers participate in through baptism is about the life that springs up again and again through God's Spirit even after the worst of endings, the most hopeless oppression and violence, after profound loss.

Not a hair on your head will be lost, says Jesus, even though you may die. By your endurance you will gain your souls. What I submit to you is that even though you and I will never run sub-two hour marathons or row across the Drake passage, as followers of Jesus' Way, we should not be too quick to dismiss the prophet Isaiah's vision of a world order in which no one builds houses they do not get to live in; a world in which no one has to kill another to eat; a world in which a wolf and a lamb can rest

together because no one hurts and no one destroys. There is fairness and justice and flourishing in Isaiah's vision. It may be impossible by human standards. But it is a "why" that has burned brightly in the souls of many over the course of human history, and that has caused people to dare great things.

For an example from our own time, just look at Good Courage Farm, which is a newer Episcopal agricultural ministry in Hutchinson, Minnesota. Some of us from St. John's went there this summer to mulch grape vines, eat pie made with berries grown at the farm, and to sing evening prayer in the beautiful acoustics of the silo. Mother Kerri Meyers is an Episcopal priest who founded this farm with her wife, Dr. Jen Blecha. The farm practices and teaches regenerative and sustainable food systems that replenish the earth. They deliberately raise food to give to the hungry at First Nations Kitchen and other neighbors. They farm in such a way that the hungry are fed, that nothing is wasted, and the earth itself is replenished and not depleted—in fact they call themselves "soil farmers" because they are seeking to feed the earth as well. Mother Kerri and Dr. Jen dare to imagine that the food systems of our world can be utterly remade so that we help and do not harm the earth, that everyone has enough to eat, and that we come to intimately know and honor the living beings we share the planet with. This is an impossible vision, but it is one that Kerri and Jen are bringing into fruition in their little demonstration plot of God's kingdom.

If we do not even dare to imagine a different world order, it will never come into being. As followers of Jesus' Way, we do not need to create

this vision from scratch. We have the beautiful description of prophets including Jesus who dared to imagine that not one thing we do and are will ever be lost, even if we suffer greatly, even if things seem to end in defeat. We should not view the great accomplishments of human history like Kipchoge's 2 hour marathon or the Impossible Row or surviving Auschwitz and say, this is not for ordinary people like you and me. Instead, as followers of Jesus' Way whose central symbol is about death and resurrection, I believe God's Spirit is inviting us to imagine and dare much more than we do now. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Today is Gratitude Sunday, a day in which we are giving our pledges to St. John's. It is true that beautiful things are happening in and through our community. It is also true that because of the combined impact of the pandemic and the meta movements in our culture, we are a smaller community than we used to be, so our income is less even as our expenses are greater in this time of inflation. It may be that the St. John's of the future looks different than it has in the past. But I believe with all my heart that we should not fear these changes. We can endure almost anything if our purpose is clear. Our purpose is nothing less than the healing of this earth, than imagining and learning and living an utterly regenerative way of being that heals and does not harm in anything that we do.

Let us spend time with this vision and nurture it and play with it. Let us cultivate our imagination with the inspiration of holy scripture and the natural world and the good examples of so many who have dared great things. Let us walk forward with endurance and hope, following Jesus' Way of Love together. Amen.