

Proper 23, Year B
October 12, 2024

“We pray that your grace may always precede and follow us.”

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have one foot in the world and one in God’s world; we are to live out the Kingdom of God while at the same time, living on this earth. No surprise these two frequently come to blows. After all, the Good News of the Gospels is Jesus turning this world on its head: for God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Jesus seems to take much pleasure foiling people’s over-enthusiastic adherence to their interpretation of the Law of the prophets. He does not re-write but corrects with common sense. Which is more important? to observe laws concerning cleanliness or to cross the road and see if the foreigner who has obviously been beaten and probably robbed is still alive and needs help? to heal on the Sabbath or allow someone to bleed to death? We who hear these things – read, mark, learn and inwardly digest – are in the world, but not of the world. And we must somehow navigate through those troubled waters. The words from our collect of the day give us a good place to start: that your grace may always precede and follow us.

O that I knew where I could find God, says Job; if I go forward, he is not there or backward, I cannot perceive him. If only I could find God. This brings to my mind the popular story of the person walking in the sand, who notices two sets of footprints – presumably hers and Jesus’ – except at the most desperate moments of her life when there is only one set and realizes that it is at those moments when Jesus is carrying her. Is God so close to Job that he cannot see that he and God are one? And again, our psalm for the day is that which we associate with Holy Week, with God’s Friday: Jesus lamenting the absence of God as he hangs on the cross: You are not here. Where are you? You have left me to suffer alone. When I most need you.

Jesus and God are indistinguishable, hanging on the cross as One.

That your grace may always precede and follow us.

Guide our feet into the way of peace.

If each of us allowed the Holy One to permeate our being, think what shelter we could be for those who are crying out, asking where God is. If we allow the

Holy to precede and follow us, we cannot help but be in a state of thanksgiving and yearn to act in some way to help others: most of us don't have the means – financial, practical, freedom from personal or professional obligations – to hop on a plane to Gaza, Israel, Ukraine, Sudan, Lebanon, Asheville, Tampa Bay or other trouble spots on our earth today to join Doctors without Borders or some other active service organization. This year, we do – those of us who have turned 18 on or before November 5, are U.S. citizens, and can attest that we have taken or affirm the Voter's Oath – have the right to vote, the privilege to vote, the *necessity* of voting. Voting is a powerful and immediate action we can take to begin to pull God's Creation out of the mess we have made of it. The naysayers all around us, those with the loudest voices, tell us that our vote does not matter, it's one tiny whisper in the midst of millions, not unlike your chances of winning the lottery or the Reader's Digest jackpot. So why bother? Who would I vote for anyway? I don't trust any politician; it's just a matter of who lines up with what I already believe or who is more convincing. One might hope that it's the one who speaks the truth, but my truth isn't necessarily your truth, and apparently no one tells the truth anymore.

The Good News is that when the Holy One guides our feet into the way of peace, the still small voice will speak through the earthquake, wind and fire and say to us "I have done these things for you; if you love me, keep my commandments and love one another as I have loved you. I kept you in safety after you came forth from your mother's womb; now you must keep those in safety who are helpless."

I commend the concept of separation of church and state as a freedom from a country imposing its official religion on its citizens. Ironically many in this country are working hard to do just that, to establish a state religion: those who are not Christian – and a certain brand of Christian – are not American. And yet I know that in order for me to survive in this earthly world as a disciple of Christ and an American, I must call upon Christ to be present in everything I do and think and say.

Normally, I avoid telling folks what to do and I cannot and will not tell anyone who to vote for. But I am urging all of us to vote, with advice a wise musician once gave: if there is a piece of music you aspire to learn and perform, it's okay to listen to a recording, but don't listen to only one, listen to as many recordings and performances as you can, otherwise you will simply be parroting someone else rather than being authentically you.

And that's when you ask God's grace to always precede and follow you.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*