

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

I sat with these readings this week with a sense of unease. Let me explain:

I grew up in a very conservative, fundamentalist church that believed the Bible should be read literally and was without error. This tradition that I grew up in used the passages we read today in very harmful ways.

Joshua's declaration that he and his household would serve the Lord was raised up as something to be egotistical about; after all, the church I grew up in believed that they were the sole possessors of right belief, the only people who were truly partakers of God's salvation. They would repeat Joshua's declaration in the (rather self-righteous) belief that they alone had made the choice that Joshua did. This interpretation dismissed anyone who had questions: they must be unbelievers; and it denigrated anyone who had doubts as lost.

Then there is our passage from Ephesians; all of this metaphor about armour and fighting was used, in the church I grew up in, to remind us that everyone who didn't believe the right way - their way - was an enemy. If you found yourself among such unbelievers at work or at school, you kept

your shields up; you put on all of your armour so that none of *those* people could reach you; you only spoke in ways that might bring them to salvation, in other words, to try to make them think the same way you were taught to think and believe. All this armour, this attitude of combatting an enemy meant that there was no love shown, just fear of the other and an unhealthy certainty that salvation was exclusive to a very few.

Our reading from the Gospel of John has the undercurrents of antagonism toward Jews that, to the harm of many, led to centuries of anti-semitism.

As early as the fourth century, passages from John were the basis to justify mistreatment of Jewish people, and to unjustly place the blame for Jesus' crucifixion on their shoulders. Again, passages were interpreted to foster exclusion, to promote the idea that there were a few chosen, and that the persecution of the so-called "lost", the "other" was some kind of vindication for the true believers.

The interpretation of these scriptures leaves me in a place of disquiet; I believe in a God of love, a God of wide-open arms and wide-open mercy, a God whose longing for humankind's redemption is so great and so vast, that we, the very humans God wishes to reclaim as God's own, cannot

even see the entirety of God's work to return us to our created image. So when I read these passages this week, I asked myself, Where do I find hope in these long-abused words? Where do I find the door that God always opens amid our human confusion, our human misinterpretation, our human way of harming each other in the name of our belief?

"Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel... Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak."

These words at the close of our Ephesians passage are the doorway, the hope that I find amid all the ways that scripture has been used to harm and to exclude. "Pray in the Spirit at all times"; a lot of the work of our faith is getting ourselves out of the way of God when God is ready to work.

Praying in the Spirit - allowing the Spirit to pray in us - is the kind of humility, the kind of surrender to God's will that can prevent us straying from the message of God's love, and bring us back when we have. "Keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints"; I love this

reminder that a great deal of the work of prayer is listening, of keeping alert to the voice of the Spirit which is praying through us, keeping the eyes and ears of our hearts open to where God is leading us to go, rather than trying to enslave the words of our prayer or our scripture to our own ego or our own fear. “Pray... that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel”; this is an openness to God speaking through us. If we allow God to speak through us, the good news of God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s lovingkindness will be the bold message our very lives will proclaim. Even when we aren’t ready for that message, even when we imperfectly live out that message, God can still speak through us if we have the humility and openness to allow it. So I look at these three passages today, and I think: what if Joshua had told the Israelites to pray that they came to understand and have compassion on the people of Egypt, even as they walked away into a new future in the name of God’s justice? What if the writers of Joshua had highlighted the peoples whom Israel made peace treaties with, whom they allowed to remain settled among them, rather than championing the bloody might of the conquering sword? What if the writer of Ephesians said, let your only armour be a tender heart, and your only weapon, love? How would the readers see the world differently? And if we remind ourselves of the

beginning of the Gospel of John, where God incarnate gives grace upon grace to save the world and not condemn it? How, then, would we treat those we've been taught are "other"?

Grant, O merciful God, that we your children may have the wisdom and tenderness to see our unity as a human family; and give us the grace to show your love and mercy among all peoples. In the constancy of the Spirit, may we always pray. Amen.