

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Our dear friend and fellow St. John's parishioner, Peter Dwyer, has had, as many of you know, a successful career as an Insurance broker. And for many years he has provided his clients with a planning calendar like this one. Now, a planner like this, one which lays out the year in specific terms, in months and days which have both names and numbers, is very appropriate for those who think of how to insure that their time is well-spent and well-accounted for on a daily basis. Using it can help responsible folks keep track of what they did and when, what they need to do right now, and what they have to look forward to in the future. Peter has usually provided these planners to our parish vestry members for example, so that they might be guided through each liturgical year and be able to locate important meetings and projects which have been planned. But now this year is turning out to be a much different one, and perhaps Peter might have saved some printing costs and given us a single sheet with just three categories: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. For that is what these last 3 months have been like for many of us. Doesn't matter what we call each day...many of us just haven't had reason to care. Do we even care what the date is? Do we even know what day of the week it is? There was yesterday. And okay, there is today. And something will probably happen tomorrow.

In today's first lesson from Genesis, we meet Abraham and his wife Sarah. Now, Abraham is said to have left his home of origin in southern Mesopotamia to become a wandering nomad in the Land of Canaan, but if one reads the scriptural text, it was actually his father, Terah, who packed up his family and headed west from the ancient city of Ur. There is no reason given for why Terah did that, but it always reminds me of the John Steinbeck novel "Grapes of Wrath", and the famous movie of the same name starring Henry Fonda. You probably remember it: Desperately Tom Joad packs up his family of sharecroppers during the Oklahoma dustbowl days onto an old truck and heads west towards California and the Pacific coast, in hope of a better future. So, Terah packs up his extended family, maybe on an old, unreliable camel, and heads west towards Canaan and the Mediterranean coast. And so, his son, Abraham, comes to manhood as a homeless, wandering nomad in the lonely wilderness, where it doesn't really matter what day it is; I mean, there's yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and the adventures one can have in the meantime while living in tents, but they wind up seeming all the same.

And meanwhile, Abraham has become nearly 100 years old. And along the way, out there in the lonely and anonymous wilderness, he has come to know God, and God has come to know Abraham's longings. More than anything, Abe would like to have a legacy, and it is a great source of suffering to him that he has no child to be an heir. In truth, he would like to be the father, the patriarch, of a great tribe, a whole nation even. As the years go by, with nameless days and unnumbered dates, he is becoming resigned to the painful fact that he will be the last of his line. He and Sarah must be too old by now to parent any children, and there will be no one to remember his unique adventures, no one to benefit from what he has learned, no one to carry on the great trek westward to the sea, where there might be the salvation of lush orange groves and fresh seafood. Here we are in Genesis chapter 18 already, and the wandering couple have no children. But Abraham could have sworn that this God, whom he has come to know, has promised him progeny, way back in chapters 12 and 15, and descendants whose number will rival the number of sands in the desert and the stars in the sky.

And then one day (it doesn't really matter what day it is), three strangers, the Lord somehow among them, happen by Abraham's tent. He treats them with hospitable reverence, and while they are snacking outside the tent, the Lord predicts that Sarah will indeed have a child, the long-hoped-for child which will insure their legacy, who will give their lives future meaning. Write it down right there on the calendar, for it's sure to happen! Thinking that she is clearly too old to become a mother, Sarah, who is eavesdropping inside, can't

help but laugh at this ridiculous prediction. In fact, she scoffs at it openly, and is overheard by the Lord. Aside from being rude, her laughter shows a lack of faith in God's great dream, and she winds up denying it. But, she has been caught at it, and is told that she shouldn't be so unbelieving, that all good things are possible for God. And, if you stay tuned to the story, you'll find that the Lord is right: Sarah bears Abraham a son, whom they name Isaac, which means "laughter".

One of the interpretations we might draw from the story of Abraham's life is that when we come to know God, when we are willing to be in covenant with the Lord, the days of our lives, no matter how meaningless and pointless they seem, can become a pathway to a hopeful future. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans from which we read this morning, puts it his way: When we are in covenant with Christ, the sufferings we endured yesterday build our character for today, and our character provides us with hope for tomorrow, and hope, when it is based on God's dreams, does not disappoint. Life with God dedicates our time as preparation, and if we endure patiently there is something to look forward to. One might call it a reward, but really it is just the reception of God's Holy Spirit, the reception of God's loving gift of mercy, grace, and invigoration. The gift that keeps on giving, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, a gift which encourages and fills us with hope as we go out each day into this broken world. A gift which empowers us to bring healing with love and character.

So, Jesus, while he is out and about proclaiming the good and hopeful news, puts it this way: The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. The time is ripe for the healing of the world, but there are few who hear the call, who sense the urgency, who are ready to be in covenant with God's great loving purpose. Too many are trapped in that paradigm of meaningless yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows. They have not permitted their suffering and endurance to translate into character and hope. There are still too few who will commit to the work of healing...they are too busy schlepping from one day to the next without the vision God hopes to share. But in the gospel reading this morning, Matthew gives us the list of those 12 people who were the first dedicated followers, those whom we call the disciples. And what a mixed-bag that list is! Itinerant fishermen, tax collectors and rogues, men whose days had been the same-old, same-old. Let's see, I went fishing yesterday, and now I'm fishing again today, and tomorrow I think I'll go fishing again, and who cares what day it is, anyway? Or, let's see, I went out and collected taxes for the Roman oppressors yesterday, and am doing it again today, and tomorrow, whatever day that is, I'll probably do the same.

But when they begin to follow Jesus, that all changes. They become the laborers of the field. They become the charter members of the Jesus Movement. You know, when we read the histories of parishes and other organizations, we usually find up-front the names of the founders, the first vestries, the charter members. Well, that's what that rag-tag group of disciples were. And their charter was to be apprentices and follow the instructions of the master. Jesus gave them, as we heard in this reading, specific instructions about how to reap the ripe harvest, casting out demons of all sorts and curing all manner of infirmities. They were to be like tenacious sheep among wolves, wise as serpents, innocent as doves, and faithful servants of the master's intentions. In fact, the master's own skills should be evident in the work of the apprentices; their accomplishments should accurately resemble his, and the vision of the Lord should be able to be seen in their faithfulness of character. They should, in effect, be as his very body in their mission and ministry.

So, dear friends, when we seem trapped in meaningless and pointless times, when things seem like they can't, or won't, change from day to day or month to month, remember that it is Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And therefore, each day can be full of promise, blessings, and even miracles. That which we endure can grow the content of our character, and, by the Holy Spirit, character can fill us with hope. The laborers, those who go out day by day to work in the fields of this broken world resembling Christ, members of Christ's Body, following his instructions, they spread God's hopeful dream like fertilizer. And they know they do it in the name of the one who was, and is, and is to come. Amen