



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
Pasadena, California

Grace Trumps

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones
March 21, 2010

A reading from *Acts* (12:1—12):

Herod, the ruler of Judea, began to persecute some members of the church. He put John's brother, James, to death with the sword. And when he noticed that this pleased the Jewish leaders, he decided to arrest Peter as well – which he did during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Peter was taken into custody and put into prison. Herod assigned four squads of four soldiers each to guard him. He intended to put him up on public trial after the end of Passover week. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church prayed to God continually on his behalf. On the night before Herod was to open the trial, Peter slept, bound with double chains, between two guards – while more guards kept watch outside the door. Suddenly the angel of God stood before him and the cell was filled with light. The angel nudged Peter in the side to awaken him. “Get up, and hurry,” the angel said, and the chains fell from Peter's wrists. The angel continued, “And put on your belt and your sandals.” Peter did so. Then the angel said, “Wrap your cloak around yourself and follow me.” So he followed the angel out, unsure whether what he was experiencing was really happening, or whether he was having a vision. They passed by one guard post and then another, and came to the iron gate leading to the city, which opened for them by itself. They went through it and walked the length of one street, when suddenly the angel disappeared. It was only then that Peter recovered his senses. “Now I know,” he said, “that all of this is true – that our God really did send an angel to rescue me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were so certain would happen to me.” When Peter realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark. A number of people were gathered there praying.

The Rev. Dr. Serene Jones:

It is a pleasure and an honor to be here this morning. This is my first trip to Pasadena, and also my first time to be in All Saints. I can't remember when I was in a group of people of this size, with so much energy and attention and wise enthusiasm. It is a real delight to be here.

I first started hearing about All Saints, having never been here before, from a classmate of mine over thirty years ago at Yale Divinity School, who went from Yale to Bridgeport, and ended up at All Saints. For years I heard his stories about this remarkable community that made him into a priest, where he learned to preach the Gospel and to be with the people. That was Tim Safford¹. [Applause] So you have long lived with me through Tim.

It is also exciting to be in the pulpit and be in the presence of a former student, Zelda Kennedy². She had to listen to me talk about Providence and Justification and Sanctification and Ecclesiology and Soteriology and all those wonderful words that, once you leave seminary, you are glad you don't have to think about anymore – except for the content. It is a pleasure to be here with her.

It has also been a delight for me to have this chance to spend time with and get to know your pastor, Ed Bacon, better. The Gospel reminds us over and again that the place that Grace dwells in the imagination is always the place that is on the edge of where we think it should reside, and it is those places that life happens, and your pastor has mastered that often unmasterable place. It is a delight to get to know him and to get to be a part of this congregation that has been a part of that imagination's formation.

Let us pray:

Most gracious God, we give you thanks for this day, and I ask that you bless the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, that they be acceptable in your sight. We ask this in Jesus' name, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What two remarkable passages we have had read to us from the New Testament this morning! The first one, the story of Peter's miraculous escape from prison, has all of the features – as does the second one, in some ways, but this *Acts* tale even more – of a superhero action adventure. In fact the image that first came to mind for me a couple of months ago when I started wrestling with this passage came straight from L.A. and – I hate to admit I even watch it, because I am so disturbed by what it is all about – *24*. [Laughter] You see a Jack Bauer-like figure breaking through all sorts of walls and chains, and arriving on the other side of what looked like an insurmountable set of obstacles. The way we often imagine the story, much like what often happens to Jack Bauer – you arrive on the other side of it and you are just coherent and happy and so proud of yourself for the way in which redemption has once more unfolded in history in ways that advantage you.

There are so many ways in our culture that the story of Jack Bauer in *24* – but also the story of Peter in *Acts*, read a certain way – captures our play of mind, captures the narrative that we tell ourselves as a nation, and it is also a narrative that we tell about ourselves as Christians. Of course the story we tell ourselves as a nation is a nation: the United States is a place where, when time and again, faced with insurmountable obstacles, the people gather up their strength, and, guided by the Holy Spirit, manage to move forward in history and redeem the situation – to conquer and to progress. And in the life of faith, one form this story takes is in the tale that drives the imagination of the prosperity gospel preached across this country. It is a story you hear time and again from pulpits in churches in which, if your life feels like a prison – if you're like Peter, with chains on you – then you're not paying attention to the angels in your midst. If you pay attention, and you give yourself over to the entrepreneurial spirit and you dream abundance, you will end up outside the prison and in the alley, saved.

Now, it is easy to see the flaws in these two stories – the nation story and the prosperity story – but it is a story that runs dead through the center of liberal congregations like this one. I say that because I know them well; I am the president of a seminary that has mastered the liberal narrative of redemption. It is a story in which you understand the life of faith; one where we are anchored in faith in this very complicated world in which live. And this is a good story. We are called by God in the midst of that to see brokenness and oppression all around us, and to apply ourselves collectively to its healing, and to do so always motivated by a sense that our redemption comes on the other side of that. Our liberation awaits us, collectively, in that moment to come. It is a story, as it moves through our corporate lives, that is by no means a “wrong” story; but it is a story that, in order actually to dwell in the middle of that complex core called human existence as it dwells inside us, requires another story to be set next to it.

And that is the story that I think actually runs through this account of Peter, when read differently. Return with me to the story. Instead of seeing Peter as a robust figure contemplating his escape, it is more likely that Peter was shivering in the corner of his cell, sleeping – if he was asleep – not in the rest of the righteous but in the deadness of the condemned. His friend James had just been executed – beheaded. He had been thrown in prison and he awaits his own execution, probably cold, probably completely disoriented, fractured, maybe coming undone, unable to think. And this angel appears.

Now it is most likely that, when that angel came into the cell, Peter didn't know whether or not it was a guard coming to take him to his execution. You get a sense of how chaotic it all is, and how the angel has to stand there and tell Peter, “Peter, put your sandals on. Put your belt on. Follow me.” Peter probably followed not even knowing where he was going. The scripture tells us, as we move on into the passage, that Peter actually thought

he was asleep. And then we hear the story of the angel. The chains fall from his arms; the angel opens the door of the cell; the soldiers are all asleep; door after door opens; and finally Peter finds himself in the alley.

Now it gets very interesting here. In the scripture it tells us that, when he arrived in the alley, the angel disappeared and Peter realized that he was awake. It doesn't say that when Peter got to the alley he woke up; it says that when he got to the alley Peter turned around and realized that that very traumatic, obviously confused, almost dreamlike, chaotic march from prison into the alley was not a dream but reality. Moreover, it was not a dream but reality – it was the place in which God was dwelling.

Add to this the fact that, as we know, and as Peter did not know at that moment in the story, Peter's end is not a happy one. This chaotic dreamlike state continues for Peter until, as Christian lore tells us, he was, within the year, executed in a process even worse than that of his Savior. He was hung upside down on a cross until he died. Read this way, it is far from a narrative of redemption as a superhero action story. It is not a tale in which, at the end of the day, all is made right. But it is a story that, in its unfolding, is close to the bone of so much of our lives. It calls to mind for me the situation in our world today; when we think of what it means to dwell in the space of the catastrophic, that which we cannot manage and what breaks us, what comes to mind are scenes from Haiti.

It wasn't but maybe three weeks after the earthquake that I read a story that particularly captured me, and in a sense opened up a way of thinking about redemption that didn't require this relentless drive to make it right, particularly in the context where it was clear that this would not be made right easily, or well, or quickly, and for many – if ever. It is a story of Methodist churchwomen from North Carolina – Charlotte – who had gone down to Haiti and found themselves in the middle of the earthquake, out in the street. They were not harmed, but they were disoriented. Like Peter, they described feeling like they were in the middle of a dream, a nightmare. They looked around them. The world had literally crumbled; it was falling apart, and there were broken bodies everywhere. The story tells us that the women, in the midst of this disorientation, didn't do something grand too save the day. They did what they felt compelled to do, which was all they could do. Like Peter putting on his sandals, they reached into their T.J. Maxx pocketbooks and pulled out the handful of Handi Wipes that they had stuffed in there before they left Charlotte in order to keep their hands clean as they ministered to the poor. Could they possibly have imagined...? And yet here they have these little pieces of tissue that they are now using to dab the wounds of bodies completely broken, some with severed limbs.

In the midst of this a man comes running towards them and says, "Come quickly, you must help me, my wife is in labor. She's having the baby now!" The women say, "Well, we don't know what to do, we're not nurses, we're not doctors. We can't do anything." But he says, "You must come now!" And one of the women says, "Well, I *had* a baby." [Laughter] And she follows him into that dark, prison-like series of passageways, like Peter. She finds the woman still partially caught in the rubble. She is there, and she, with the screams of that woman and with her husband by her side, brings that baby barreling into history.

Hmm. There it is! Life just came, uninvited; the angel just came into the moment. As we know with this child, the possibility of this child having a life that is redeemed, or even livable – the possibility that this child even lived very long – is something that we have to grapple with. And if our stories are tied to these relentless narratives of redemption, then that moment falls off the map of history. And yet, as with Peter, it happened nonetheless. It calls us to think in profound and complicated and yet oh so very pure and simple ways about what it means to be a Christian at the end of the day, in the midst of the rubble, in the dark wandering through the prison.

This next two weeks brings us straight through to that dark place in our story, as we begin this week to ponder and next week to walk through that path called Holy Week. Nowhere else in the Christian year is the temptation stronger to move towards this first redemption narrative. We want to think about Easter; we want to have a tale

of brokenness that we are only able to bear – and we’re willing to go there; we’re engaged, thoughtful, meditative Christians, we can go there – because we know that the redemption is on Easter morning. The challenge to us with this second story is to see redemption on the cross. On the cross. What Easter does is point us back there and say, “Who was on that cross? That was *God* on that cross, in that dark night.”

And what happens on that cross? Oh, so much! So much mysterious to us, so much that even with all the stories that history has given to us trying to hold it, we can’t make sense of it. But what happens on that cross is a moment in which Jesus bears witness to that Grace in the moment by refusing to turn away from us as he dies. We never leave his gaze. He is awake to us to the end – in ways that those Methodist churchwomen, even in their best efforts, only struggled towards in terms of awakesness. He is awake to us in ways that, even at our best, we are pained to fail in the face of.

To see Grace as the power of that awakesness in the middle of our lives – a “Presentist” understanding of redemption – could there be a bigger challenge in today’s world? And it is not just a challenge for us internally; it is a grand political challenge. Because as a nation, when we over and over again want to turn to this narrative of redemption that always sees a good ending, it requires that we continually fall asleep, like Peter, and not wake up to the reality that there are forces at work that are breaking us. We want to fall asleep to the reality that we are still not just in Afghanistan, but Iraq. We want to fall asleep to that. The narrative of redemption wants us to start thinking about how soon we are going to get out of Afghanistan, as if Iraq is somehow a figment of our past imagination. Healthcare. How often, when we think about healthcare policy, do we want to think about it as a policy issue, and forget that in the present moment it is about *bodies* – our bodies, broken bodies? To be awake to the physicality of what is at stake in our nation right now with respect to our desire to care for bodies is enormous, and if we are looking right now for some future answer, we are time and again going to miss it in the present, and that is what I am afraid is going to happen this time.³

And the story goes on. How often in our own lives, if we have to wait for that moment when the pains that we bear are resolved in order to know that God loves us, and to feel the breadth and depth and possibilities of Grace, then we are never going to experience it. If we wait until those angels appear, that when they arrive we are totally awake to them, then in so many ways they are never going to come. But if we can breathe, if we stop thinking that Grace only happens when we understand it, when we are not lost in Peter’s chaos, when we are not in dark alleys, when we are not in those places in our lives when we are not sure we are awake or asleep and we think we are asleep, in those places where it just doesn’t make sense – that is the place that we meet the angel; that is the place that those mothers in Haiti – the Haitian mother pushing life into history, the Methodist woman from Charlotte with her Handi Wipes – those are the angels, those are the angels we are promised.

Hear this poem called “The Prayer Chain.”⁴ I think it gives us a glimpse of that Grace in the present.

My mother called to tell me
about an old classmate of mine who
was dying on the parish prayer chain—
or was very sick—or destitute—
or it had not worked out—the marriage, that is—
or the kids were all on drugs—or—she couldn’t quite
remember—
but all the old mothers were praying intensely
for all the pain of their children

and for life—awake—they were holding life in their quiet
rooms—probably sipping decaffeinated coffee—
and I bet they’ve been praying for me at times—
so that I find my way—so that I won’t rob a bank—
I’ll take them—the mystical prayers of the old mothers—
the angels—
it matters—all this patient and purposeful love.

It comes. Grace comes. It comes.

Amen

Video of this sermon is available on the All Saints Church Website, at www.allsaints-pas.org. Select “Sermons and Speakers”, then “Sermons on video”, then find this sermon in the list of available sermons. This sermon is also for sale on CD and DVD from the Disk Media Ministry on the lawn at All Saints Church on Sunday mornings, or can be purchased by calling the All Saints Church office.

The following notes have been added by the transcriber, and were not part of the Dr. Jones’ sermon:

¹ The Rev. Timothy Safford spent his childhood at All Saints, and then spent several years as a staff priest at All Saints Church. He became Rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia in 1999.

² The Rev. Zelda Kennedy is currently a staff priest at All Saints Church, the Senior Associate for Pastoral Care and Spiritual Growth.

³ For those who read this sometime later, it should be noted that Dr. Jones is referring here to the healthcare reform bill that was up for a vote in the US House of Representatives at the same time as this sermon was being delivered, the outcome of which was not yet known.

⁴ “The Prayer Chain” by Tim Nolan can be read and heard on Garrison Keillor’s “Writer’s Almanac” Website, at <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2008/04/26>. The version in this sermon has been slightly modified. The poem is on page 55 of Tim Nolan’s *The Sound of It*, a 77-page paperback published in 1988 by New Rivers Press.