

Hope in discouragement

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on November 15, 2015, the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. Hebrews 10:23

We are all shaken by the attacks in France on Friday. Once again, we have to come to grips with the threat of crazed terrorists striking any time, anywhere. We have been at war with terrorists since the beginning of this century and many believe that we will be involved in armed conflicts for decades to come. We pray for peace and for a better world, but as long as there are radical extremists bent on using religion for violence, we have to live with the reality of ongoing threat of armed attacks. We can't help but wonder what hope we have in any of this.

The Letter to the Hebrews was written during incredibly difficult times when 1st century Christians were suffering terrible persecution. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote a message of hope and encouragement: Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (10:23)

This past week we honored all who served on Veteran's Day. There were veterans of World War II as well as the wars in Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of those who survived returned home suffering from severe traumatic distress. The number of American veterans who have committed suicide is now greater than those killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have spent billions on the largest defense system in the world but not enough attention has been paid to the care of the veterans suffering physical and emotional damage from serving in combat.

There are those who say that religion is the cause of so much Mideast violence. It is not religion but the misuse of religion as a pretext for violence. Jesus teaches us to be makers of peace. I believe in a loving and benevolent God who loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us. I don't believe in a malevolent God who inflicts evil on us. There are those who may believe that, but I don't. Much of the evil and suffering in this broken world has been brought on as a consequence of sin and the misuse free will. We live with what is beyond human control without the need for neat and tidy answers. I can live with misfortune, disease, natural disasters and loss of loved ones without losing my faith in a loving God. I have confidence that God's goodness is greater than any evil force. When things go wrong, I know that God still loves me and helps me to get up and go on again.

We live in a nation founded on the principle of freedom of religion. While on one hand it seems that freedom of religion has become freedom from religion, on the other hand Christian evangelicals have gained political power among conservative candidates. Historically, a candidate's religion has sometimes been an issue. In 1928, New York governor Al Smith lost the election partly due to being a Roman Catholic. In 1960, voters were suspicious of Senator John Kennedy as a Roman Catholic. In 2008, some voters were suspicious of Romney as a Mormon and many still believe that the President is a Muslim. This year Seventh Day Adventist Ben Carson has questionable views that seem contrary to both science and history while Bernie Sanders describes himself as a cultural Jewish humanist. It is a mark of Christianity that we affirm the real world but are not of it. We press on as the world presses in. The church in the world is good, but too much of the world in the church is not.

To put things into perspective, no matter how long we may live we are all here on an interim basis. Humanity passed across the stage of life before us and will continue on after us. We fallible mortals live and work within imperfect structures and realize that nothing is permanent except God's love for us.

I like to think of us as tenants in a very large household with Christ as the head. We look out for each other and share in a sacred meal together. It is then that we are surrounded with that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Many of them have left the world a better place for us and we want to do the same for those who come after us.

In the gospel of Mark we read about the end times, not a popular subject with us. During this sojourn called life we experience losses and endings, whether it is a parent, a job or a marriage. There are those who believe that God takes loved ones from us but I believe that God only receives them then when they die. God doesn't intend suffering and misfortune or disease and natural disasters. Rather than fixing blame on God, we would best use our energies as opportunity to overcome setbacks and losses.

Jesus warns us that there will be false prophets who try to convince us of when and how the new world order will come, but that is not for us to know. Meanwhile, we live in preparation and readiness and remain alert. False prophets claiming personal authority try to assume far too much power over us.

With atrocities being committed in the name of religion, cities in chaos with rampant crime and dishonesty in the financial world; with children suffering abuse, neglect and exploitation and with unfaithfulness and promiscuity, it would seem that the time is ripe for God to bring on the end of this age, but that time is not ours to know. We must not be part of bringing on an end to human existence.

We have to come to terms with what it means to be a full human being. We reach full Christian maturity when we are confronted with who we really are. By God's standards everything is turned around. The first are last and the last are first. Racism, homophobia and sexism are no longer acceptable or tolerated. The old values give way to equality, fairness, and inclusion of those who have been marginalized.

As we anticipate the coming Thanksgiving holiday, being thankful is not confined to one day. We need to live every day in thanksgiving for what we have by sharing with those who go without. Alone we can do little. Together we can be part of making this a better, safer world.