

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
RCL Lectionary, Year B
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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Democracy, Demons, and Darwin

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Yesterday, as I returned from a retreat with our vestry, I had received four e-mails all concerned with illness. Another flu or cold bug (or maybe both) is going around. It's been going through the Redwoods retirement community the past couple of weeks, and heaven knows we at home have encountered a number of cold bugs this season – comes of having a five-year-old in school, I suppose.

But there's something harder than the flu or cold bug this year. If we're not down the head by the flu, many of us are feeling worn down by the calamity in the world around us. Some of us are bedridden, like Simon-Peter's mother-in-law, metaphorically – emotionally and spiritually – as the crisis of the world stretches towards the long-haul. Hopes these days for swift action by the government are tempered with the nagging sense that we are exchanging one form of debt for another, and the after-glow of the inauguration subsides to the more familiar partisanship that generates unhappy compromises and far less than the perfect stimulus package promised to end all our woes – that is the elusive “perfect” by whoever's definition you prefer.

It was Winston Churchill who said, “Democracy is the worst form of government. . . except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Charles Darwin turns 200 years old this week, and while his ideas and the empirical evidence that he collected radically changed our view of biology and our perspective on our place in a much more fluid and dynamic universe than our spiritual ancestors recognized, our struggle to grow up remains just as prescient for us as it did for them. In our location in history, we have largely pushed out demons as a root of our ills, but then we might just as well blame our fortunes on the slow trial-and-error march of evolution, or our genes, or at least the place we were born, or our upbringing, or what we ate last Tuesday.

All these are things not at all in our control. And in that sense, the source of our ills seems just as capricious, just as difficult to pin down or drive away, as did the supposed demons of the first century. Naming the viruses and the bacteria or the chromosomes or the problems in evolutionary process; or the SEC failures, Ponzi schemers, and the over-leveraged derivatives gives us just about the same sense of control over the uncontrollable. And so some of us are like the disciples in the morning, looking for Jesus. Everyone is searching for him. Where is he when we need him? Where is the One who makes life so much easier for us when he's around?

As Isaiah says this morning, “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” Yeah. I get it. In the language of our younger generations, I *grock* it. I mean I get a deep sense of Isaiah here, in the core of my being, in the sheer exhaustion at this point in our common trudge. The great transfer of legacy between generations is being ground away by not only the recession but the gnawing sense that the old way of doing business no longer really works. . .for us, for the world, for all of creation. Running ragged like so many of us are at this time, we might stop for a moment and wonder just what are we running after, whether it is worth it, whether our collective malaise and ills are truly a fair cost for the elusive goal that no one seems to name.

My particular generation has been named by some sociologists “survivors,” an appropriate term in a world where evolution is ongoing. We're a generation that lives through calamity and just gets by doing what we can to live, under the weight of economic structures and obligations created by our parents, with an infrastructure built by our grandparents and now needing bank-breaking deferred maintenance. We wrestle with the existential questions about whether it is enough to simply survive, to live. And all of us now, regardless of our generation, are being pulled back into that fundamental question: how to survive.

It's a question of the ancient Israelites living in exile, too. And that's another reminder from our scripture this morning. We are not alone historically or spiritually. In a way, that's good news in and of itself. Ours remains a question of survival, and whether survival is good enough. Who is God without the Temple? Who is God without Jerusalem? Who is God when our fortunes have been taken from us by advancing armies of soldiers or more mundane market forces? Who is God when our grand plans lay not simply at our feet in ruins, but the very context for those plans, the world we thought we knew so well, is suddenly altered or completely swept away?

We are tempted to utter these days just as did the Israelites in Babylon: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." Will God regard us after all that has befallen? Will God show us the way?

But Isaiah answers the existential questions with a compelling statement:

"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." Not the tribal God. Not simply the partisan God on our side or on the other side. Not the capricious God who is angry one moment and delighted the next. Not the wrathful God when we are naughty, the providential God when we are nice. Nor the God who will give us the perfect stimulus package or finish our evolving, growing selves in one great wave of the divine wand. But the God of all being. The God who holds our ends and our beginnings and walks with us at every step of the journey. The God who holds even our hopes and dreams with a tender embrace that defies even our most generous imaginings.

Isaiah insists that the ancient Israelites and we, too, keep hope kindled as we await renewed strength, renewed hope. Waiting for and running with a hope that the pain of now will pass, and is passing and the purpose of the divine works out its sometimes slow and mysterious, but gracious purpose. The promise is that we will be taken by the hand and lifted up, like Simon Peter's mother-in-law. That our mission is far from done in tough times when the metaphorical demons are out the illness strikes. But it is precisely when the world is the way it is today that we are called as Jesus calls his disciples out into the villages and towns to share the gospel, to take the hand of the sick and lift them up not simply for restoration but for renewal. To rise, with Christ's gift of transformed life, from the beds of our illnesses and begin to serve anew.

Faith is found in the willingness to keep on keeping on, trusting not necessarily the strength we have right now, but the strength we will receive. To trust that God in Christ is coming and is already at work among us, that we may one day grow up enough to mount up with wings like eagles, and soar not on our own merits, exorcisms, or cures, but upon the grace that God offers each and every day in the common made holy, in the faces and hands of our sisters and brothers, and in the gift of each and every creature and grain of sand and breath infused with the Spirit of God. *Amen.*