

Easter 5 (2022)

2016 was a miserable year, at least second half of it. No question about it.

At some point the rain stopped coming and wildfires broke out.

North of here fire decimated parts of the tourist town of Gatlinburg, leaving 14 people dead.

To the south and much closer, there were fires in the Cohutta mountains. An estimated 28,000 acres burned. The air was so full of smoke that it was hard to breathe. Even inside your eyes burned.

But, then, at some point after Thanksgiving, rain finally came. Not much at first, but every drop sounded delicious as it hit the rooftop. Showers at last! Showers of blessing! Showers we needed.

Today is Rogation Sunday, actually the first of four days so designated in the church calendar: Rogation Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday . . . then Ascension on Thursday.

‘Rogation’ comes from the Latin *rogare* meaning ‘to ask’.

In particular on these days, we ask that the earth may yield her increase to the end that human need might be met.

Rogation is to spring what Thanksgiving is to autumn . . . an acknowledgement that all good gifts come from above, not the least being our daily bread.

*We plough the fields and scatter
The good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered
By God's almighty hand.*

*All good gifts around us
Are sent from heav'n above.*

Says one of our hymns.

Rogation is a time to remember farmers and others who cooperate with God to bring food to our tables.

Some in this congregation work in the local community garden which grows food for the needy. On this day, we remember and give thanks for these faithful souls. No doubt they are fulfilling God's righteous will in their life.

But there is no reason we should limit our 'asking' to agricultural needs. Indeed, the scriptures point in the opposite direction.

"Ask, and it shall be given you," says Jesus in Matthew 7:7. Here the scope of our asking is left wide open.

The question is: Are we availing ourselves of this tremendous resource?

Why not put Jesus' words to the test in your own life and do it today? What are your needs? What needs do you see around you? /// Ask.

A television actress was asked her view of God. Her answer was:

"God is still in heaven, thank goodness, except for 10 o'clock on Sunday when He is at church."

Her view of God is too restrictive. God is far more than an absentee landlord who pops in once a week to deal with 'spiritual' matters . . . a celestial figure divorced from the real world of commerce, government and agriculture.

So: Don't paint your God too small.

An aphorism from the past says: **"Either He is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all."**

This is true. He is the Lord the field, the plough, the harrow no less than the pulpit, the altar, the stained-glass windows.

What is your view of God? Is He is a God afar off, a God that can be put aside except for one hour on Sunday morning, or, is He the Lord and Leader of your life round the clock, every day of the week?

J.B. Phillips once wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. Don't let that be said of your God.

This morning's Old Testament lesson comes from the pen of Ezekiel. Even a cursorily look at writings of this prophet will reveal that Ezekiel had a very expansive view of God. His God was a big God, the God of history, past and future.

As Ezekiel writes, he and his fellow Jews are away from the land of promise in Babylon. Their kings have been removed, and the Davidic dynasty appears to have come an end. It was the worst of times.

But, why were they in Babylon? Was it because God was too weak to prevent this calamitous turn of events from taking place?

No, it was because they had, again and again, broken the covenant God had made with them at Sinai.

As Deuteronomy ends and just prior to their entering the Promised Land, Moses had given them a glimpse of the future as revealed to him by God.

If they obeyed God's commandments, things would go well with them in the land.

To borrow Ezekiel's happy turn of words found in this morning's reading, there would "be showers of blessing."

But if they did not, if they forgot God and turned and served the gods of the nations all round them, they would get what Moses called the 'curse'.

What was this curse? Was it just that their crops would fail and that their livestock would not flourish? No, it went far way beyond this.

Exile was the prescribed curse for breaking the terms of the covenant. The land was the great blessing; absence from it the great curse.

Ezekiel lived some 900 years after Moses, nevertheless, he interprets what had had happened to God's people in light of Moses' prophecy. Their exile was a result of their infidelity. But, Ezekiel also saw better days coming.

Despite appearances to the contrary, God was not through with His people. Future showers of blessing lay ahead.

Before we picked up reading, God, speaking through the prophet, had delivered a devastating indictment against their ‘shepherds’, which by interpretation mean their **kings**, especially those just prior to their exile.

These ‘shepherds’ have been bad shepherds. They have fed themselves and not the sheep. They have caused God’s flock to be scattered.

The good news is God is going to do something about this sorry situation. He Himself is coming to be their shepherd, their king. If those in the past have been bad shepherds, He will be the good.

He will seek out His sheep and bring them into a place of safety and peace. But, *how* is God going to do this thing?

In verse 24 we get our answer. God is speaking here: **“I the Lord will be their God, /// and my servant David a prince among them.”**

It will be through one out of David’s line that God becomes King, and *we* know who this One is. It is Jesus, the One who is both God and Man . . . Emmanuel, God with us.

Through Him will come ‘showers of blessing’ upon Israel . . . and out from Israel to the world. They will be showers of blessing.

Ezekiel, again, has an expansive view of God. For the prophet, past, present and future are in God’s hands. His purposes of good will prevail.

What might Ezekiel’s view of God and history mean to us?

Well, I see it . . . and as I hope you will see it . . . it stands as a great encouragement, a cause for hope and peace . . . and yes, action.

As we look out on our world with all its complexity, uncertainty and pain, it appears to be out of control. “Hate is strong and mocks the song of Peace on Earth.” Meanness is real.

A few days ago, the body of a Methodist minister in DeKalb County, the Rev. Marita Harrell, was found in a van. She had been stabbed. The perpetrator is believed to have been someone she was counseling and trying to help?

Yes, a battle is raging out there, but the

first stage of what God revealed to Ezekiel has in fact come to pass. The true king has landed on Planet Earth and is already reigning. Rain drops of blessing, healing, have started to fall. But, more are coming. That is Ezekiel's vision, and it should be ours.

We've looked in the back of the book and have discovered 'God wins.'
Jesus is coming.

So, we have reason for hope. No matter how fierce the storm, no matter how severe the drought of truth and justice, victory is assured.

So what are we to do? Sit down and wait for God to do the next bit?

NO! We are to called to join in . . . to become 'workers together with God'.

To be advance signs of the kingdom in the present . . . to be people of hope, compassion, peace, justice and service.

To repent of our own waywardness, and to go His way.

How this will look on the ground will be different for each person. Our goal must to fulfill our unique calling . . . and not someone else's.

But, how do we know what that calling is? /// That is a 'tuffy', isn't it? ///

Or, is it? If we have heard our Lord's command recorded in Matthew 7:7 **to ask** and the promise that accompanies it, we know where to find our answer . . . how to discover our calling.

Ask. Listen. Do. May these be our watchwords on this Rogation Sunday.

Pray for the field and the farmer, but also for yourself that you may fulfill God's righteous will.