

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by the Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34,53-56

Sunday, July 18, 2021
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Let us pray. Holy and loving One, when we are far away, may we find you. When we cannot see the path, may we know you are close. When we are burdened, may we discover your embrace as the peace beyond understanding pass into us and the world, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Once Far Off



Photo by [Dan Grinwis](#) on [Unsplash](#)

... now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...
(Ephesians 2:13)

A long time ago in an ancient city, a letter arrived. I can imagine it was read aloud many times. Written by Paul, or perhaps a supporter of Paul,¹ to the early Christians in Ephesus, in present-day Turkey, the message described a time and place of awakening.

The beauty of the words cascade across time, across many gatherings and communities, arriving to us here as a distant chorus. And, indeed, the letter to the Ephesians is

considered to be, in part, a hymn.² And we hear this “singing letter *today* in our own community as an invitation. With poetic language it is telling us, the Gentiles, the uncircumcised, the strangers to the covenants, the ones without God, without hope, without promise,³ that, in Christ Jesus, we have been *chosen* before the foundation of the world by Christ; that we are destined for *adoption* as the children of Jesus Christ; that we are given the “riches of his grace;” that Jesus has *made known* to us a great mystery; that we who hear this word of truth, the gospel, and believe, have been *marked* with the spirit as God’s own people. (Ephesians 1:3-14); we have been made *alive together* with Christ by God (Ephesians 2:5).

A song of reconciliation of all things in Christ, and a call to participate in this reconciliation.

A vision of the universal church.⁴

As we who “once were far off” are brought near. (Eph 2:13)

We are so close to something so big that we can glimpse it only in one another. There is so much more going on than we can see or feel on our own. And so we are swept up, like in the Gospel passage today, in the larger story of humanity, coming and going, yearning and following, doing and teaching. We sense the crowds, the ache and desperation, as they draw near to the One who is Peace; the One who has broken the dividing wall, who has created in himself one new humanity.⁵ (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Somehow we are far *and* near. Wandering away *and* glimpsing the destination. Going in different directions *and* coming home. Falling away *and* coming together. Lost *and* yet mysteriously carried.

We feel far off when we regret what we have done or said, or what we haven’t done or said, knowing we could have avoided harm or brought healing in our relationships.

We feel far off when we hear the cry of the Earth, and bear witness to a deluge of rain, waters rising with unimaginable swiftness and power and destruction and terrible loss of life, like in flooding of riverside communities in Europe this past week.

We feel far off when we discover the depth and extent of our complicity in racism and systemic injustice; when we acknowledge the legacies of enslavement, exploitation, and oppression; when we hear stories and voices long buried in silence; and the trauma woven into so many human bodies.

And we feel far off when we learn of the discovery of mass graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of former boarding schools, as we begin to hear the stories and listen to the voices of survivors who as children were forcibly removed from their families, forcibly assimilated, and abused. Cultural genocide. The erasure of identity. Names forgotten and lost.⁶ As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said this past week, “We must come to a full understanding of the legacies of these schools... As followers of Jesus, we must pursue truth and reconciliation in every corner of our lives... This is the Gospel path to becoming beloved community.”⁷

Seeking truth and reconciliation in every corner of our lives as we who “once were far off” are brought near. (Eph 2:13)

We are brought *near* to Christ when we say *yes* to this work of reconciliation in this moment, in whatever form it takes. We are brought near, knowing we are invited always into radical grace, a divine embrace, in which all are welcome.

We are brought near to Christ when we accept our vulnerability.

We are brought near when we realize the trauma across generations is to be carried, not by the ones upon whom it has been inflicted, but in the body of Christ of which we are all members. We are brought near to Christ when we declare ourselves a community and a grounding place for truth-telling, truth-facing, and paying close attention to our lives and to all that happens around us.

We are brought near, into the new humanity in Christ, when, as Walter Brueggemann writes, we no longer protect privilege and advantage but listen to the silenced and see the ones who have been invisible.⁸

We are loved. We matter. We are needed. We are *doing something* to build the temple within our own humanity. Isn't this what is happening in the beloved Psalm 23, inscribed in our hearts, that we are dwelling within the house of God forever, securely and intimately. “Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Psalm 23:6)

Let us discover the embrace of God's love, anticipating and knowing us, carrying us, and drawing us near, in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

READINGS

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.

He revives my soul

and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I shall fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;

you have anointed my head with oil,

and my cup is running over.

Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Statement on Indigenous boarding schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings⁹

July 12, 2021

Office of Public Affairs

The Episcopal Church

In Genesis, God conferred dignity on all people by creating them in God's own image—a belief that is shared by all Abrahamic faiths. We are grieved by recent discoveries of mass graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of former boarding schools, where Indigenous children experienced forced removal from their homes, assimilation and abuse. These acts of cultural genocide sought to erase these children's identities as God's beloved children.

We condemn these practices and we mourn the intergenerational trauma that cascades from them. We have heard with sorrow stories of how this history has harmed the families of many Indigenous Episcopalians.

While complete records are unavailable, we know that The Episcopal Church was associated with Indigenous schools during the 19th and 20th centuries. We must come to a full understanding of the legacies of these schools.

As chair and vice-chair of Executive Council, and in consultation with our church's Indigenous leaders, we pledge to make right relationships with our Indigenous siblings an important focus of the work of Executive Council and the 80th General Convention.

To that end, we commit to the work of truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities in our church. We pledge to spend time with our Indigenous siblings, listening to their stories and history, and seeking their wisdom about how we can together come to terms with this part of our history. We call upon Executive Council to deliver a comprehensive proposal for addressing the legacy of Indigenous schools at the 80th [General Convention](#), including earmarking resources for independent research in the archives of The Episcopal Church, options for developing culturally appropriate liturgical materials and plans for educating Episcopalians across the church about this history, among other initiatives.

We also commend Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland on her [establishment](#) of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative and the effort to “shed light on the traumas of the past.” The Episcopal Church is also working to support legislation that will establish a truth and healing commission on Indian boarding school policy, which would complement the Department of the Interior's [new initiative](#).

As followers of Jesus, we must pursue truth and reconciliation in every corner of our lives, embracing God's call to recognition of wrongdoing, genuine lamentation, authentic apology, true repentance, amendment of life and the nurture of right relationships. This is the Gospel path to becoming beloved community.

¹ Jennifer K. Berenson, in Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 2010); p. 2053.

² “Ephesians 2, like 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 and Colossians 1:15–20, is one of the New Testament’s great hymns to God’s reconciliation of all things in Christ and God’s call to all those who are in Christ to participate in good works of reconciliation.” George Stroup, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost I* (Propers 3-16), Kindle Edition by Bartlett, David L., Taylor, Barbara Brown; Location 8546.

³ “... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:11-22)

⁴ “In powerful poetic language drawn from early Christian hymns and the Jewish scriptures, Ephesians celebrates a vision of the universal church. According to God’s eternal plan for humanity, Christ’s death brought together Jews and Gentiles into a new, unified community: the Jewish law, which previously divided Jew from Gentile, was rendered irrelevant by the cross, and Christ thus reconciled both groups to each other and to God (2.14–16).” Jennifer K. Berenson, in Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 2010); p. 2053.

⁵ “However, now things can and should be different, because the “dividing wall” has been demolished and hostility can no longer be embraced, because the Prince of Peace has come! This is an obvious allusion to the rending of the veil in the Holy of Holies, which signaled a new beginning (Matt. 27:51). Moreover, the creation of a new humanity begins with the abolishment of the Law.” Sammy G. Alfaro, writing in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B, Volume 3* (p. 172). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁶ “Statement on Indigenous Boarding Schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), July 12, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-on-indigenous-boarding-schools-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-and-president-of-the-house-of-deputies-gay-clark-jennings/>

⁷ “As followers of Jesus, we must pursue truth and reconciliation in every corner of our lives, embracing God’s call to recognition of wrongdoing, genuine lamentation, authentic apology, true repentance, amendment of life and the nurture of right relationships. This is the Gospel path to becoming beloved community.” “Statement on Indigenous Boarding Schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), July 12, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-on-indigenous-boarding-schools-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-and-president-of-the-house-of-deputies-gay-clark-jennings/>

⁸ “In the new algebra, the silenced and the invisible among us count... there is no parsimony in the face of deep bodily need... we may notice the emergence of new neighborly policies that treat others like neighbors. The old rule continues to have a deep grasp on our imagination. As a result, someone somewhere will get something for nothing. In the old math, we regard “mine” as “mine,” not ever to be shared... we protect privilege and advantage. But the new breeding goes on in spite of us!” Walter Brueggemann, “Do the Numbers!”, *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XLIV, number 4, Pentecost 2021, p. 64.

⁹ “Statement on Indigenous Boarding Schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), July 12, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-on-indigenous-boarding-schools-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-and-president-of-the-house-of-deputies-gay-clark-jennings/>