

Tenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C):

“Miracles, Bold Decisions, and Sanctuary Church: God’s Fingerprints and Ours”

Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

August 17-18, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Many of us remember **the Miracle on the Hudson**: the “safe” crash landing of US Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River on January 15, 2009. Shortly after leaving LaGuardia Airport the plane struck a flock of Canadian geese and lost all engine power somewhere northeast of the George Washington Bridge. Maybe you’ve seen the movie *Sully* in which Tom Hanks plays Captain Chesley Sullenberger, acclaimed for his skill in bringing the plane down on the water with all passengers and crew surviving and only 5 serious injuries. The famous cartoon of that event shows a giant hand, God’s hand, cradling the plane as it floats in the river.

This past week there was **the Miracle of the Ramenskoe**,. This time a Ural Airlines flight carrying 226 passengers and 7 crew flew into a flock of gulls shortly after leaving Zhukovsky International Airport in Moscow. The 41-year-old pilot safely landed the plane in a field less than a mile from the airport. One report says:

Photos and videos shared online by passengers shortly after the crash-landing show the jet, its slides deployed, nestled among tall cornstalks as stunned passengers look back at the downed plane.¹

I’m thinking that anyone who got on that plane as an atheist was a believer by the time he or she slid down the escape slide and stood up in that field. Merriam Webster’s first definition of *miracle* is: “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs.” Not a lot of plane crashes end well. We know who to credit when they do. We can connect the dots and recognize God’s presence in the sky and on the ground. We can see God’s fingerprints all over that situation.

But, of course, that’s not always so. In today’s Gospel Jesus might say to us: “You know if the wind is coming from the northeast, you should batten down the hatches! You know if there’s

‘red sky in the morning’ that’s ‘sailor’s warning’ while ‘red sky at night is sailor’s delight.’” In this paraphrase from *The Message* Jesus then says:

“You know how to tell a change in the weather, so don’t tell me you can’t tell a change in the season, the God-season we’re in right now.” Luke 12:56

Jesus is fired up about this, frustrated that people aren’t recognizing the miracles He performs, the God-insights He shares, as clues that God is on the move, doing something radical in the world, preparing the stage for the coming of the Kingdom. We almost have to fasten our seatbelts to avoid whiplash from the abrupt change in direction and shift in tone from last week’s “Have no fear, little flock” to this week’s Gospel. Here’s Jesus’ opener restated in *The Message*:

“I’ve come to start a fire on this earth – how I wish it were blazing right now! I’ve come to change everything, turn everything rightside up – how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so, I’ve come to disrupt and confront!” (Luke 12:49-51)

Something kept Jesus up at night: the fact that sin turns the world upside down and He had come to turn it rightside up again, and **that** meant people had to declare themselves for or against Him, had to show with their lives whether they were for or against God’s agenda. He knew He wasn’t going to receive 100% of the vote. Even though the angels sang at His birth, “Peace on earth, good will to all,” even though Jesus **is** the heaven-sent Reconciler, our Redeemer, the fostering of unity inescapably creates divisions as well. Jesus knew that His obedience to the Father’s will would lead to His death. (That’s the baptism He talks about: Luke 12: 50) He cautions us that a decision to follow Him, devoted commitment to the coming of the Kingdom as the Father intends it, wholehearted openness to the movement of the Spirit in our lives, will be costly, too, and will put us at cross-purposes with others, including some who are near and dear to us.

One commentary puts it this way:

The absence of conflict is not a present possibility. One can only choose the cause for which to fight and the commitments that are worth holding.²

There are lots of holy causes that need fighting for these days. Our prayer of the day reminds us what God's priorities and expectations of us are:

"O God judge eternal, you love justice and hate oppression, and you call us to share your zeal for truth. Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed...."³

We're called to read the signs of the times as closely as we track the weather, our bank balance, the stock market, our cholesterol or FaceBook postings. We're called to judge what is unjust in this world and in our own land, what policies and attitudes are oppressive, and to use our voices on behalf of the voiceless. We need courage, all right, to "take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed," even when it means we disagree with those with whom we **want** to be in closest communion.

You may have heard about the action of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee a couple weeks ago, designating our denomination a "sanctuary church." That is a bold decision sure to aggravate or cause some divisions among us, but the sense of the assembly was that this is how God calls us to act "on our watch." Pastor Sara Lilja from our Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry is scheduled to preach and lead forums here at Holy Trinity the first weekend in October, and I'll be asking her to educate us and answer your questions about the meaning and implications of this ELCA stance. (The resolution does not dictate the actions of any individual synod or congregation. We are free to chart our own course, as long as we do so with well-informed consciences and faithfulness to the Gospel.) Meanwhile, our newly re-elected Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton has written:

Many of you are asking, "What does this mean?" Our call to love our neighbor is central to our faith. In our baptismal covenant we promise to strive for peace and justice in all the world. One of the ways we live out this vow is through our commitment to welcoming the

stranger. With this declaration, we publicly state that walking alongside refugees and immigrants is a matter of faith.⁴

In addition, Lutheran Disaster Response has pointed out:

Except for our members whose ancestors were here before European settlement or others who were forced to come to the U.S. against their will, the ELCA is an immigrant church. Our decades-long work with immigrants and refugees **is** how we practice our faith in the world. Lutherans started Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, one of the nine refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S.⁵

This resolution is not encouragement to engage in illegal behavior. It is the best, most current example I know of, about reading the signs of the times, recognizing God's children in need and risking division in order that the Kingdom may come more fully among us.

Elsewhere our Lord Jesus says, "If you're not for me, you're against me." (Matthew 12:30) Our actions and our words declare whether we're truly following Christ or are Christians in name only. Our actions and our words tell the tale whether we're buying into God's vision of the world or are plagued with myopia that doesn't allow us to see beyond our personal interests. Are we committed to the coming of the Kingdom or are only looking out for number one?

Keeping with the Lord's opening words about fire, in the apocryphal (also-ran) Gospel of Thomas we read Jesus' words: "Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is distant from me is distant from the kingdom."⁶ May the Holy Spirit, who came once in tongues of flame, keep **our** feet to the fire, make our hearts burn within us, and grant us grace to be more and more faithful. Just as we see **God's** fingerprints on holy happenings, may God find **ours** there as well. Amen

¹Ivan Nechepurenko and Megan Specia, "Russian Plane Crash-Lands in Cornfield, and Reports Say All Survived," *New York Times* on-line, August 15, 2019.

²*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. __ (Nashville: Abingdon, 19__), p. 267.

³*Celebrate*, Sunday, August 18, 2019, 10th Sunday After Pentecost (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress).

⁴"ELCA as a sanctuary church: What does this mean?" Lutheran Disaster Response on-line, August 15, 2019.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Op cit., ²*New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 266.