

Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday May 4, 2014
The Rev. Elizabeth A.B. Tesi

As a child, my brother and I used to play with GI Joe toys. They were FUN TOYS—the smaller action figures, with the jointed arms and legs, and a torso which was attached to its hips by a tiny elastic. The GI Joes got into a lot of shipwrecks and battles. There was much screaming of “Save yourselves! Abandon ship!” And while, indeed, that was a workable philosophy for little kids, eventually, we both grew up. In today’s world, we react with horror when we hear of the ferry captain who fled his sinking ship instead of trying to save as many lives as he could and we commend soldiers who make sacrifices of limb and even life for the sake of their comrades. In today’s world, we hope to believe that decent human beings help save each other for each other. All that formed an interesting juxtaposition as I was noticing Peter’s words to those around him: “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!”

Today’s Acts section occurs very shortly after the Holy Spirit has come down upon the apostles. We won’t tell that story until Pentecost, still several weeks away. But this story is actually the next paragraph after that. All the apostles, newly filled with the Holy Spirit, are preaching in many languages to all the crowds around them. Peter raises his voice above all the crowd, who miraculously hear him in their own languages, and begins speaking. This section of scripture is a snippet, just the last bit of his impassioned sermon. He is a deeply faithful Jew, and knowing his Hebrew scripture, he has sketched out the roles that the prophecies have played. Now, he wraps up his sermon with a firm exhortation for his listeners to separate themselves from their world, to live holy lives. Actually, even though we tend to read this reading in nice church voices, it looks like it might have been a little bit of fire and brimstone.

I imagine that the issues we face as a Christian people in a society that is becoming more and more religiously pluralized are not all that different from the issues and concerns that the faithful Jews of Peter’s time would have faced during this time in Roman History. Peter urges his followers to “save themselves from this corrupt generation.”

And indeed, not everyone in this church is free from persecution today. There of course are issues on the international stage. We can think of the 234-plus girls kidnapped in Nigeria, or the Vicar of Baghdad who is visiting the Seminary and who does much of his ministry encased in a bulletproof vest, but even here, we have regular ordinary American citizens facing persecution, family trouble, abuse in their personal lives, who come here for sanctuary. And yes, we want to say that we are a safe place and that our church’s good news is that we are a place for mental, physical, and emotional safety.

What’s more, though, as Christians and reasonably nice people, most of us in this church on this May Sunday morning do have the blessing of being mentally, physically, and emotionally safe. We’re pretty much a minority in this society—the churchgoers. Yes, we also live amongst a cor-

rupt generation, and here Peter gives us this idea that, as Christians, we can save ourselves and remove ourselves from the tainted world.

Here's the problem though. Peter, and his contemporaries, knew Jesus as a living human being. They walked and ate with him. They lived through the last days of his life and the first days of his resurrected existence, and they lived during a time when walking home to Jerusalem probably meant walking by many crucified bodies on the Way of Tears. They had a very real, persistent sense of urgency. The ship was sinking. Jesus had changed the world and was coming back, very soon. In fact, some of the apostles believed that Jesus would return during their lifetime, that they would not die until he'd returned. For a group of people who had, not even 2 months earlier, seen their leader viciously tortured and brutally killed, this idea of immediate removal from the very real violence of their time is a relief.

It would not be for several decades that the people would begin to realize that Jesus wasn't coming back again right away, and that this sinful, corrupt generation would only continue to hold power. It would be decades before the followers of Jesus would even begin to call themselves "Christians" and to begin to become a religion that was distinct from Judaism.

And here we are, 2000 years later. Because we don't have that sense of urgency, because we don't believe that Jesus is returning this moment on the clouds to Jerusalem (and if he is, I sure hope that someone will get a text alert. I don't have my phone on me, and I'd really like to know if I need to change the ending to this sermon on the fly this morning!), we can't afford to give Peter's exhortation all the weight it would have had on that morning 2000 years ago. We can't afford to "save ourselves from this corrupt generation." We aren't getting a free ticket out of this life, swooped away to the heavens by a miracle return. This world—corrupt, broken, sinful as it is—is our home. Save ourselves from this corrupt generation?

We can't afford to isolate ourselves, telling ourselves that the problems of our neighborhood are not our problems. We can't afford to rest easily thinking that a bowl of porridge is enough to fully care for our friends in Tanzania: porridge gives the kids a fighting chance to get enough calories in their body to last through the day, but they still need our active engagement to learn and grow. We can't afford to think that because we drop \$10 in the plate that is enough to help us feed the hungry. Every gift card helps us keep our mission alive. And Each week, I turn down requests from people asking help to pay for rent or other immediate needs—not because I necessarily disbelieve their story, but because their need far outstrips what alms I have to offer. We still have neighbors who are actively unsafe—living in insecure homes, subject to violence or transience or food insecurity, who we can help to find greater security. We can't afford to think that singing praises to God in a closed off church building is enough to bring balance to our world. It's not. And I don't know what our answer is. I don't want this sound like our actions, and prayers, and giving is not enough to be holy and blessed and useful. It is. I think we need each other's help to address these larger problems.

How do we help each other craft a takeaway message for our own society? I'll start.

We don't know when the end will be. We live deep in the midst of injustice, and inequality. What if our response to this reading is not "save yourselves," but "help this corrupt generation save itself, and find its soul, and locate its center." The twist is that Peter says that this message of Good News is for us and our children and for those who are far away. So we are called to be part of this world around us, to bless them in the midst of the corruption and inequality with the good news of Jesus' unconditional love and Holy Spirit dwelling with us right now.