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Matthew 22:34-46
 Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18
 Psalm 1
 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

October 25, 2020
 The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

I want to begin this morning with some words of comfort. It's a poem written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a poet whom I often read when preparing my sermons.

I am here¹

My child,
 I feel the piercings of your people's hate.
 I feel the anguish of your sorrow,
 the weight of despair.
 Your cry of rage rises in my own throat.
 I hold in my hands the sea of tears,
 the single drop of blood.
 But child,
 my love is sovereign.
 I am at work in this world,
 redeeming all brokenness
 and healing every wound.
 Though fearful people fight against me,
 and bitter people rage, they are puny
 in the face of my love,
 my mending of the whole cosmos.
 I am making all things new.
 See, even within you yourself the storms rage,
 and yet the dawn rises.
 My child, I am here.
 Even as you yearn for peace
 and struggle for justice, trust deeply.
 I am still creating. I am here.

What does it mean for us to believe that God is still creating? Mending, healing, redeeming? Could we be so bold as to imagine that our pain and anger and grief actually rises up in God's own throat as if to cry out for us? Carrying our burdens as God's own.

There is a certainty in these words, a clarity, a determination. God speaking out with the fullness and the strength of divine power. A voice that says a resounding, "I shall make you well. I am still creating."

¹ <https://www.unfoldinglight.net>

Wouldn't this poem have sounded very different if God wasn't so certain? For instance, what if the words said, I may show up and I may do some work. I might mend what's broken. I probably will heal a few of you. Frankly, that doesn't feel so good to put this poem in that context. After all, who wants a wishy, washy God who might come around here and there?

Luckily, that's not what we get. It's not how God shows up. And we need to hear that reminder.

In our fall bible study this week, we began a conversation about the difference between the terms "shall" and "may"; or you might use the terms "will" and "might". One connotation gives a definitive answer. It's certain and proactive. The other connotation is ambivalent and distanced. One, we can trust. The other, feels uncertain. And, when it comes to God's promises, we kind of want them to be trustworthy. We want something we can count on.

Yet, how often do we hesitate to use those same definitive words in our own lives? I'm talking about when we need to commit to something or when we need to stand up for someone or for what we believe. How often do we trade out "will" with "might", "shall" with "may." Most of us like to keep our options open.

And so, I was struck this week how many times our readings tell us we "**shall**" do something. Matthew and Leviticus are especially bossy about giving us clear cut guidelines about what is expected of us...

You **shall** love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

You **shall** love your neighbor as yourself.

You **shall** be holy.

You **shall** not go around saying bad things about others.

You **shall** not take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone.

Question...Are these optional?

They aren't supposed to be but don't we make them optional all of the time? As in...I might love God with all that I am if it's convenient. I may love my neighbor if they aren't too needy. I might try to be holy if it's socially acceptable.

Now, imagine if that is how our texts had been written. Keeping our options open, having choices, doing what we want if and when we get around to it.

We may only be shifting a few words around in this exercise, but the impact of those words has far reaching impact on the world around us and on our lives. It's the difference between "shall" and "may." So, why would the writers of Leviticus and Matthew use the word "shall" so many times?

Because it matters! Our actions matter and these directives we are given are not optional. Yes, God is adamant about reaching down and proactively working in the world but God also expects us to NOT be passive receivers of God's grace and mercy. God expects us to be active, committed, eager followers of Christ. Not wishy, washy people of faith but get-up-and-go people of faith.

You **shall** love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And, you **shall** love your neighbor as yourself.

Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, says this, *"God has created the world with a capacity to be "very good," and that goodness is maintained by the order that God has built into creation, setting boundaries, for instance, between light and darkness, earth and sky, sea and dry land (Genesis 1). When those boundaries are maintained, life can flourish. When they are crossed, chaos ensues."*²

Maybe that sounds a little mellow dramatic but the point is clear...we are called forth to do the good work of God so that life can flourish. It is our responsibility to make sure that life **will** flourish, not that it **might** flourish.

So, what are some of your "shalls?" I started to answer that question this way:

If God can feel the piercing of hate, I can and I will stand against hate.

If God can feel the anguish of sorrow, I can and I will love others when they are hurting.

If God can feel the weight of despair, I can and I will seek ways to help the suffering.

If God can hold my anger, I can and I will walk beside others who are angry. I can and I will listen their stories.

If God is at work in this world, I must get to work, too.

If God is making all things new, you better believe that I can and I will do my part.

Our faith calls forth nothing less, not maybe or may or possibly or eventually. Our faith calls us forth now. Hopefully, that definitive feels about right these days.

I have one more thing to read to you this morning. It's a prayer that I want to end on from the Black Rock Prayer Book.

Listen for God's word in your life.

The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful
for anything but love.

Let your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4626

Let your hands be so blessed
that everything you touch is a sacrament.
Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.
Let your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.
And let your heart be so opened, so set on fire,
that your love, *your* love, changes everything.
And the blessing of the God who created you, loves you,
and sustains you, be with you now and always. Amen.