



*Hold Fast to What is Good*  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost A 8/30/20  
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our mouths and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Whew. I feel like we've been through yet another scary, existential week.

Another tragic shooting caught on video of a Black man. A white teenager wandering safely through a crowd holding aloft an assault rifle, allegedly used moments before to kill two and injure one. More images of a burning, looted city. California remains on fire. The Gulf Coast pummeled by Hurricane Laura. Many of us still can't be near loved ones. Colleges and schools suddenly revise plans to open - Newton most recently on Wednesday. COVID remains very much alive. And even though our Commonwealth has done a very good job controlling the virus, we have the highest unemployment rate in the nation. (<https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>). The second of two political conventions happened this past week, each of which spun their own hyperventilating, hyperbolic predictions of the apocalypse.

Needham Superintendent of Schools Dan Gutekanst was quoted in the *Needham Times* saying he was "deeply anxious" about the beginning of the school year. He expresses what many of us are feeling. We are, many of us, wearing an invisible cloak of anxiety and uncertainty that weighs us down, sometimes keeping us from remembering to breathe.

Pleased don't change the channel. I'm not staying here!—just acknowledging where many of us are, because the stakes feel so high.

All of which makes me think that I would really enjoy being with Moses.

I imagine that it's quiet in his desert. Bright stars shimmering in the deep midnight sky. While I don't know anything about being a shepherd, I imagine there is some time to sit and think; and while there must certainly must have been danger from which to protect his sheep and himself, I'm guessing that he didn't wear a cloak of invisible anxiety.

Though he did know about anxiety. Years before, Scripture tells, as a young man, he had murdered an Egyptian whom he saw beating one of his fellow Israelites. And he ran, far, far away, to Midian, a couple of hundred miles south east of Egypt, as the crow flies, in Northwest Arabia.

Again, Scripture tells us in an earlier portion of Exodus that Moses arrives in Midian just in time to chase away marauders who are threatening seven women at a well. Out of gratitude, the father of the seven women, a local religious leader, gives Moses a wife, Zipporah, one of his daughters, and job. Together, Moses and Zipporah even have a son, Gershom. And there, as a husband, father and son-in-law, he is minding the sheep in the shadow of the holy mountain that tradition says he will return to one day, to receive the Commandments for a new people.



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But for now, how mundane. How appealing for the moment, for this overstimulated, anxious, modern person. Sitting on a rock, maybe. Sand and pebbles between his toes. Scanning the horizon perhaps for wolves, or other dangers.

When he notices a flame burning in a bush that is not consumed. I imagine something like one of those mesmerizing, advertising gizmos with a powerful fan blowing on red and orange fabric that whips and snaps. Initially you do a double take, then look in fascination. “I must turn aside, and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

And God, as if he were in fact lying in wait for Moses to notice, has gotten his attention.

“Moses, Moses! Take off your sandals—you are standing on holy ground.”

We’ve all just been sitting here listening to this same story together: A story of an imperfect person minding his own business, yet alert and aware enough of his surroundings to respond to the prompt of curiosity—or was it the Holy Spirit at work—and he finds himself engaging directly with the great I AM, the Living God, who has a job for him.

We who have just heard this story are all in different settings. Our ordinary days are all unique in this strange time, each of us with our own psychological make-ups, family and individual histories, living situations and so forth. Each of us in our own contexts is on our own holy ground with the possibility of a call, and invitation. It’s an experience of God getting our attention, through whatever means are close at hand and readily at God’s disposal. For me I’m wondering if the relentless fires in our land—wildfires, sparked either by man or nature—fires that must stop—may be drawing us to pay attention to God.

Stay with me here while I shift!

We also, together, listened to a segment from Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome a moment ago. It comes from a portion where Paul is describing what new life in Christ looks like. And in this particular section he throws something like 23 different exhortations at us, like bullet-points from a Power Point presentation. I can assure you that we not going to plow through them point by point—that would take months of Sundays— but lived together as a whole fabric, they animate an ethic of love for Christian people, the way we are to live our lives in the world.

I want to fasten our gaze on one particular phrase that is crying out for our attention: “Hold fast to what is good.” Other translations say, “Cling to what is good,” or even more vividly, “Hold on for dear life to the good.” These are words to live by these days. Hold fast to what is good: like a life raft as a ship flounders; like an oxygen mask in an airplane experiencing turbulence; like a lifeline dropped from a helicopter to a woman standing on her roof as the flood waters rise.



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Some of us are glass half empty by nature; others are glass half full people by nature. The other day I saw someone holding a coffee mug imprinted with the words: "half full." That person is a glass half-full kind of person. These days, we all need to be practicing glass half full thinking and doing. And this is not Pollyanna thinking. It does **not** ignore hateful rhetoric or heinous deeds. Rather, living this way acknowledges the reality of danger by embracing its opposite—like a life raft, or an oxygen mask. In the face of these fires, God is calling us, inviting us, all to hold fast to the good. This is what gives us energy to fight what is evil.

And there IS so much that is good, so much good to hold on to.

We can cling to the fact that we woke up this morning. That we are in church; that we have a friend to call, or a family to love. That we finally received some much-needed rain in these last few days. That as a congregation we were able to feed families through the B-Safe program in July. That we've been able to continue to feed our friends at MANNA through the pandemic. That our prayer and Bible study groups continue through the miracle of Zoom. This is Good!

That our town has been running smoothly and safely amidst it all (with a shout out to Tedi Eaton, our town clerk, and parishioners who will be helping on election day; don't forget to vote). We are thankful for free parking downtown. For meals available this summer through the schools for hungry kids. For kids at the High School who are standing up racial justice. For town-wide reads raising consciousness and action on racial issues. It's good that deaths from COVID in MA have remained low. That we have amazing health care workers and administrators working around the clock to keep us safe. That we have dedicated educators and police officers. That, nationally, we have organizations like Braver Angels which bring reds and blues together in a process which restores civic trust. That we have a Constitution, that, while far from perfect, contains within it the tools to correct the imperfections—the tools to form a more perfect union.

Each of you can probably think of *infinitely* more goods to hold fast to.

Parenthetically, I want to give just a little bit of a history comparison. We have had more dangerously divided elections. The Presidential election of 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr was decided in the House of Representatives on the 36<sup>th</sup> ballot. Less than twenty years removed from the victory at Yorktown, there was serious doubt as to whether the new nation could survive. So, we've been here before; we can hold fast to the good that we can make it through again.

There is a story that is attributed to the Cherokee tradition. One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?" His grandfather simply replied, "the one that you feed."



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(<https://www.nanticokeindians.org/page/tale-of-two-wolves> accessed 2020.8.29)

Hold fast to what is good.

*And we have God to hold on to*—we have Jesus to hold on to, the One who loves us more than we can imagine, who provides us the spirit of courage and generosity, to be agents of hope and good.

I believe our call right now is not to merely to hate what is evil;  
it's to hold fast to the good, so that we have before us the reasons to heal that which is broken, starting right where we are.

**Amen.**