

Proper 9 Year A

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She has stood just off the southern tip of Manhattan, at that point where the Hudson and East Rivers meet to begin their final journey to the Atlantic Ocean for over 125 years now, beckoning those from distant shores – like a moth drawn to a flame – to a new life, a new dream, a new future. At her pedestal are written these familiar words:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Images of the Statue of Liberty, the lady in the harbor, have filled the airwaves, on everything from patriotic public service announcements, to insurance

company commercials, to advertisements for beds and mattresses, as we find ourselves this weekend celebrating the 238<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this great nation of ours. And still they come today... from all corners of the globe, through gateways like New York and Miami, Los Angeles and Seattle, McAllen, TX and Detroit, MI... in search of the American dream... in search of freedom. They come seeking freedom from persecution, freedom from poverty, freedom from a dead-end life with no hope of ever breaking the cycle of poverty or violence or oppression back home. But they have come here not just seeking freedom from things they hope to leave behind. They come here as well for another kind of freedom... the freedom to dream, the freedom to start over, the freedom to breathe the fresh air of liberty, of possibility, of endless promise. Still... they come.

I have thought a lot about those words this past week, written by American poet Emma Lazarus, which are inscribed onto a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty— partly because of our annual Independence Day celebrations, and partly because of the text of this morning’s gospel lesson. Whether or not Lazarus’s poem was meant to have any direct connection with Matthew 11:28, the allusion is unmistakable. Coincidentally or not, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses” sounds a whole lot like “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

For those of you who have been hanging around the Episcopal Church for a long time – as I have – those words from Matthew’s gospel may be permanently etched into your consciousness, for it was recited every Sunday in church – or at least as often as communion was celebrated – as the lead-in to the eucharistic prayer. In fact, it still shows up in the Rite I version of Holy Communion in our own Prayer book. The text went like this: *Hear what comfortable words our*

*Saviour Christ saith to all who truly turn to him, “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.”* Even as a child, I heard those “comfortable words” both as an invitation from Jesus to me to come and receive his most gracious gift, as well as an invitation of what the Christian community should be about in creating a safe space for those beyond the walls of the church who were in travail and who were heavy laden so that might come as well, and experience for themselves that divine comfort offered freely to all. And so, those words were both a source of comfort, and a source of challenge, as we were consistently confronted with the question as to whether we were creating a place where others could hear those words for themselves, and find Christ’s comfort in their own lives. So, while those words may have been “comfortable”, it didn’t mean that they were always “easy.” I was taught as a child that we and God were in this together... that it was a combined effort... that God and me – God and my family – God and my church – had to be pulling in the same direction for God’s grace to fill the world.

All of which brings me back to those words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. This talk of “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” may make for the stuff of high school civics classes, and warm and fuzzy sentiments expressed by romantic idealists, and mawkish greeting card quotes, but the reality is that quite a number of Americans don’t really believe it. We just passed a milestone last month with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the, let’s just say, less noble moments in our nation’s history. It was June of 1939. Threat of war was already engulfing Europe. Germany was just three months away from invading Poland, marking the official beginning of World War II. Persecution of Jews in Germany had already been going on for six years. *Kristallnacht*, the coordinated series of attacks against Jews throughout Germany

and Austria had occurred six months previously. On May 13, 1939, the *MS St. Louis* set sail from Hamburg, Germany with 938 Jewish refugees aboard, looking to flee the Nazi persecution which was closing in around them. Arriving off the coast of Florida the following month, and what was sure to be safe harbor,

the U.S. government refused entry to the refugees, forcing the ship to return to Europe.

That episode in our country's history became a moment of national shame, sparking a period of corporate soul-searching about what it really meant to be an American, what Americans really believed, and what America really stood for. You might think that we would have learned our lesson. But as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, George Santayana famously said in 1906, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

And so, the saga continues, and the scene has shifted right here to California, as you have probably seen on both the local and national news the past few days. Now, instead of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany being denied entry into the U.S. through Florida, it is Central American refugees from El Salvador and Honduras and Nicaragua fleeing the poverty and violence of their homelands who are being denied entry into the U.S. just 170 miles down the road from here in Murrieta, in Riverside County. Now I understand that some of you may be supportive of those protesters, waving their American flags and blocking the path of the immigration busses. But whatever rationale they are using to support their actions, it's not the words on the Statue of Liberty... and it's not the words of this morning's gospel lesson. Both of those texts provide a very different set of images, and promote a very different set of values.

A few years ago now, I was invited to travel out to Nebraska to officiate at the wedding of a young woman who was a former parishioner many years ago in Montana. Holly's dad died when she was a young child, and she and her mother had subsequently moved to Nebraska. Holly's husband-to-be, Matt, and his family were all from Atlanta, so Holly and Matt wanted to give them a real experience of life in the west. The rehearsal dinner on the evening before the wedding was held about 20 miles from town at an old-fashioned chuck wagon dinner site, where the meal consisted of steaks the size of dinner plates cooked over an open fire, beans and potatoes, and home-made ice cream for dessert. Before the meal, there were even wagon rides out onto the prairie, where you could still see the faint tracks of the Oregon Trail still visible 150 years later, as early settlers trekked west through Nebraska to places like Oregon, and Idaho, and California.

Our wagon, which seated about 15 or 20 people, was pulled by two large draft horses, yoked together, who effortlessly navigated us through the waist-high grass, as the wagon master regaled us with stories of life in the Old West. But no matter how entertaining the driver and his tales might have been, what really caught my attention was watching these two horses working together to share the load, to share the task, to share the burden of transporting those 15 or 20 people on a 30-minute excursion through history. Whenever one horse would stumble and lose its footing, or get distracted and start to wander off to one side or the other, or move either too fast or too slow to suit the driver's wishes, the other horse would be there to pick up the slack, and – because they were linked together – the wagon ride went along flawlessly. The work of those two horses wasn't easy... but because there were two of them working side-by-side, they were able to accomplish far more together than either of them could have done individually.

The real comfort of Jesus' comfortable words is found not just in that opening phrase, "Come unto me," but in the sentence which immediately follows. After promising to give rest to the weary and the burdened, he then goes on to say, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." When I hear those words, I hear an invitation... an invitation to take one half of the yoke, while Jesus takes the other half, knowing that when I stumble, Jesus will be there to keep us moving forward... an invitation to be yoked and partnered with the one who, in the words of St. Paul, "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant"... an invitation to share with Jesus in the transformation of all creation... an invitation to find my rightful place alongside the incarnate God, shoulder to shoulder, doing the life-changing work of ushering in the kingdom of God. That, my friends, is exciting work. And what makes that yoke easy, and that burden light, is the knowledge that I never would be able to do any of that if I were trying to accomplish it all on my own.

We celebrate this weekend Independence Day, which to me is a bit ironic. Because now, more than ever, we need to be reminded that we are dependent upon God... and that God is dependent upon us... and that we are dependent upon one another... to fulfill and complete the work which God has set before us. It is holy work we do. And it is work which we can never do alone. So, despite the fireworks and all the festivities, despite the patriotic speeches and stirring melodies, despite all of the messages extolling the virtues of independence... despite all that, take a few moments to find a quiet place deep in your heart, and give thanks for the absolute and utter dependence which defines our relationship as Christians to God and to one another... and defines, as well, our truest sense of what it means to be an American... a part of the United States.

Whether we wanted to admit it or not, our fate was caught up in 1939 with those Jewish refugees off the coast of Florida. Whether we want to admit it or not, our fate today is caught up with those Central American refugees in Marietta. Whether we want to admit it or not, our fate is always caught up with the fate of God. We are not alone. We are never alone. In all times, and in all places, we are inextricably linked together. We are never truly independent. For we are bound together one to another: “Take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”