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The Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost

October 12, 2008

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

It has been about 30 years since the first time I went to Cedar Point, but the memory of that trip is one that I carry with me even to this day.

It was a typical hot August day. Late in the day however, the air began to cool, the wind began to pick up. You could definitely feel that there was a storm brewing. As the storm grew closer, some of us decided to go for one more ride on one of the roller coasters. As we came near the ride, just as we turned a corner, there was a crack of thunder and a strong blast of wind. I looked up and saw hundreds of people running toward me. I saw the terror in their eyes. I thought to myself---This is a stampede, and someone is going to get trampled and killed. I can remember the panic I felt both in the crowd, and in the center of my chest.

Most people at some time in their life experience times, moments of panic. Moments when our heart starts to pound, our knees buckle, our hands start to sweat. Maybe its driving late at night---either in a area that we are unfamiliar with, or perhaps when we have a death grip on the steering wheel for fear of hitting a deer....or maybe when the gas tank is nearing empty. Maybe we have moments of panic when are unable to contact a loved one who is late coming home. Maybe we panic on the night before a big test. Maybe we panic when our employer calls us into her office. Maybe we panic when we realize that an important relationship is ending and there is nothing we can do to stop it from happening. Maybe we panic when our doctor asks us to come in to talk about our last physical.

Panic is defined as “a period of intense fear or discomfort that is often accompanied by a sense of imminent danger or impending doom and an urge to escape...or desire to flee from wherever the attack is occurring.” The word panic comes from the Greek word, *panikon*...referring to the forest god, “pan”. It was believed that “pan” would follow travelers through the forest, causing frightening rustling noises in the bushes causing the travelers to running blindly in fear. Often such blind frightening running would bring the travelers to injury or death.

Our scripture readings this weekend speak about panic.

There are lots of emotions present in the Gospel parable. Rudeness, violence, shame, rage are all evident in the conduct of the invited guests and the king. It maybe a stretch, but, since it is a parable maybe we can imagine just a bit of panic as well. The invited guests panic when they are summoned to the banquet. Maybe they know that he is a tyrant, maybe they have previous experiences of his rage. So, in their panic response they kill the kings messengers. The king panics at the thought that his sons wedding banquet will be empty, he panics at the thought that his subjects are turning against him, so in panic, he burns their entire city. Panic threatens to turn the wedding banquet into a disaster.

Panic is more clearly present in the Exodus reading. Moses has delayed in coming down from the mountain, so the people panic. They gather around Aaron and beg him to make gods for them. Aaron panics as well, what can he do to alleviate their terror? In panic the people agree to his request that they give up all the gold and melt it, form it into the image of a calf that they can bow down in worship of this calf. Their panic causes them to sacrifice their well being to the calf. Its so absurd, its almost pathetic, they so panic that they give up on the God who freed them from slavery, for a cow.

God is enraged. This stiff necked people has turned on him. In his panic, he wants to destroy them so that he can begin again with a new people. Moses however remains calm. He does not give in to the panic. Moses talks God down from his panic and convinces God to turn from his fierce wrath and show mercy to the people. Moses remains calm and helps relieve the panic of the moment.

In our Philippians reading, Paul is in prison. Even though his life is in danger there is no sign of panic. Instead he proclaims: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. The Lord is near. Near, not only in time, but near as in close at hand. Have no anxiety. Let the peace of God guard your heart and mind. Keep in mind and practice those things that are true, honorable, just, pure. Paul urges the people: Do not panic, but keep and doing that which they have been taught. The God of Peace will be with them.

We do live in a time of change and uncertainty. Soon we will have a new president. We are not sure what changes this new president will bring. This change in president takes place as the nation and world as confronting a global economic crisis as well as issues of poverty, disease terrorism, climate change, war. These issues and crisis effect us all. We hear the frightening, rustling noises in all areas of our life. These frightening noises can cause us to panic. In our panic we can run blindly and injure ourselves and others. Panic can cause people to act foolishly and dangerously. Panic can cause people to turn mean. Panic can cause people to forget who they are and who they belong to. Now, in the midst of so much uncertainty, it is a time for us to remember that the Lord is near, the Lord is close at hand. God has not abandoned the world. This is a time to remember the words which Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: Nothing in creation will separate us from the love of God. This is the time to remember that God works in all things to achieve his purpose. The Lord is near, the Lord is at work. The Lord will prevail.

Let us therefore keep on doing those things which are just and true and Christ like. Let us hold fast to gentleness, kindness and mercy. Let us keep on serving those in need, keep on caring for those who are frightened, keep on welcoming those who are wounded. Dear friends, even in these times of uncertainty, these times of peril, these times of near panic, let us keep on rejoicing. Let us keep on remembering the Love of God. Let us keep on celebrating knowing that the God of Peace is with us.
