

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

The Rev. Ian Burch

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

September 27, 2020

Preached during COVID-19, via Zoom

It's been awhile since I was in formation to be a priest, and I have forgotten many of the hoops I ended up jumping through. But one weekend spent with the bishop and his staff stands out. There were four of us seeking to be ordained, and one of our last steps was to spend a weekend at a retreat center being interviewed in all sorts of different areas — to make sure we weren't too nuts to lead a congregation, I suppose. There was a woman in my cohort named Pat. She was studying to be a deacon, and she was bright and interesting. I liked her a lot.

Except, she had a habit of quoting a long-dead mystic that was really annoying. Some of you would have heard of Julian of Norwich, a nun from the middle ages who wrote down divine visions. Julian had a saying that is pretty popular among religious people: Julian said "All will be well. And all will be well. And all manner of things will be well." And my friend Pat would quote that line regularly as we were putting our lives into the bishop's hands and waiting months at a time to see whether we would eventually be ordained and serve the church.

I would get really annoyed at Pat. She was a retired attorney for the city of Chicago and was looking to spend her retirement years as a deacon. I thought, "Of course you think all will be well; you own your house and have a pension." I was a student who was constantly broke, and if the bishop said no to me, I really didn't have a good plan B. It did not seem demonstrably obvious to me that "All will be well." But there was Pat, walking down the hallways, and saying, "All will be will. And all will be well. And all manner of things will be well."

The Israelites in this morning's reading from Exodus are sick of walking around in the desert, and they are thirsty. They begin to grumble about Moses' leadership and even wonder whether God is present. At God's urging, Moses goes before them and hits a rock with his staff. Water comes down, and the people are reminded of the providential presence of God.

I'll admit to some grumbling and some doubting in these last few months. The journey through the pandemic, the political crisis, and the environmental crisis all make me want to ask, like the tired Israelites, "Is the Lord among us or not?" When I see a nation groaning under centuries of racial violence and degradation, I can begin to lose my faith as the Israelites did. When I look around, it does not seem to be at first glance that all will be well. In fact, it seems that all is very much not well. Where is the water of life that God promises in the scriptures?

Many of you will know that my dear friend, mentor, and colleague Steven Peay died a few weeks ago. I just loved that man. He preached at St. Mark's a few times and taught a very popular class here last summer. We were very different. He was a traditional churchman, well versed in the great thinkers of the church and a great lover of what I think of as the frills of the Episcopal church — the statues, the robes, the candles, the bowing, and the great processions amidst clouds of incense. And in spite of these differences, I dearly loved that man.

He was wrestling with cancer for a few years, and I checked in regularly when he was in chemo, when he was recovering, and when he was thinking about the possibility of a pretty major surgery on his jaw.

And in all the time I would talk to him about his cancer, he would say, "All will be well. And all will be will. And all manner of things will be well."

How do I respond to someone with this kind of faith? Didn't Steve know that he had a really serious form of cancer and that many things could go wrong?

I learned later that I was operating under a wrong assumption. I think what both Pat the deacon and Steven the priest were trying to tell me was that, even if something terrible happens, all will be well. This is a hard pill to swallow for someone like me — I am a planner. I am an American. I am in charge of many, many things, all of which require me to make as sure as I can that things do not fall apart. In my brain, all things will only be well when I make them well.

But this isn't what Steven meant. This summer he went into a surgery that was going to take part of his jaw. He really didn't want the surgery, and he and his wife talked and prayed and cried about the decision. I talked to him on the phone before he went into the hospital. He told me that he was scared but that ultimately, he knew that all would be well. And after his surgery, he and I texted, and his last text to me quoted Sister Julian: All will be well.

Steven died unexpectedly of a stroke after his surgery. And after his death, I had a crystal clear understanding that Steven knew very well that his death was a strong possibility in this process. And he STILL, in the midst of that, believed that his life was redeemed by a benevolent God. He still believed that there would be living water in the wilderness. Steven believed that, even should he die, all would indeed be well. Because God is the God of all things and not one thing that happens on this earth is outside the possibility of God's redemption.

I grant you that this is an enormous leap of faith. And I grant you that there sometimes seems to be overwhelming evidence to the contrary. But I also know that I have seen it. I have seen the grace and mercy of God in my friend who knew that he was likely going to die. I have seen the

light of God in someone who released himself into a mystic and beautiful faith. I don't claim that I have done that. But I am so lucky to have been close to it recently.

And so, a little older and hopefully a little wiser, I think I am beginning to understand the words of Julian a bit better. It is not that everything will turn out in the way you think would probably be best. It is more that there is not one thing on this earth that cannot be redeemed by a loving God. There is water in the desert for those who seek it. Steve taught me that. All will be well. And all will be well. And all manner of things will be well. Amen.