

# **“The Image of the Invisible God” by Elizabeth Gelfeld**

**November 17, 2013**

## **The 26th Sunday after Pentecost**

We are coming to the end of our Jubilee season and, also, the end of the church year. You can tell, because we're already seeing Christmas ads on TV, and some of us are aware that there are only ten more cooking days till Thanksgiving. Liturgy geeks are excited because next Sunday is the final one of Year C in the lectionary cycle, and the following Sunday we start the three-year cycle of Bible readings all over with Year A, as we enter the season of Advent.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus is predicting violence and destruction. He is speaking to the crowds gathered in the Temple in Jerusalem, preparing to celebrate the Passover. This is Jesus' last week, and soon he will share the Last Supper with his disciples, and then he will be arrested, tortured, and nailed to a cross to die.

But today, some people are admiring the beauty and splendor of Herod's Temple, and then Jesus reminds them, don't get too attached to what you have now.

We tend to view history as linear and progressive – it's part of our Western, modernist way of thinking. Time began, it's going on and on, and someday it will end. It's important to remember that not all cultures in all times have thought this way about the world. Some cultures understand history to be more cyclical, rather than linear. And this is more consistent with the patterns we see in nature: birth, growth,

diminishment, death, renewal ... and the cycle starts again. This might help explain why the prophets offer a message of hope, as in our reading from Isaiah today, when things have been pretty crappy for the Israelites – so many centuries of captivity, liberation, and more captivity, as well as building the Temple, only to see it torn down by occupying forces, and then starting the cycle again.

The theme we've been using for this Jubilee season is "The Image of the Invisible God." And, let me just mention that most churches that observe the cycle of liturgical seasons – Advent, Lent, and so on – do not have a season called Jubilee. For most churches, the entire half-year from Pentecost until Advent is just Ordinary Time. We Seekers, however, divide those months into several seasons of generally six or seven weeks. Most recently, we had Recommitment season, which ended with Recommitment Sunday on the third Sunday of October, a tradition that goes back to the very beginning of the Church of the Saviour. And then Jubilee bridges the gap between Recommitment and Advent.

If you've been worshiping with us for a while, you've probably noticed that with each new season there is a new bulletin, and certain parts of our Sunday worship, such as the Call to Worship and the prayer of Confession, change. I know many of you are quite familiar with the process by which we come up with each season's liturgical prayers and its theme but, just in case you don't know, I'll tell you.

Four weeks before a new season starts, the members of Celebration Circle, the mission group whose call is to nourish our worship life, have a brainstorming session. Peter and Deborah and Ken Burton and I talk about the scripture readings for the coming season. What are they telling us, and can we find any overarching message or call in the readings? We talk about what's going on in our nation and the world – or what we think might be going on. For example, when we met to brainstorm for Jubilee, the government was about to shut down,

we were facing a possible default on the federal debt, and cuts in the food stamp program were looming.

We also talk about what's going on in this community. What are the spiritual needs of people in Seekers, and how might our liturgy address those needs? We all throw out ideas, and Peter writes them down on newsprint, with color-coded markers – green for scripture, red for the surrounding culture, and blue for Seekers. Then we talk, we argue, we use each other's ideas as springboards to jump to even more ideas; and, by the end of the evening, trusting in the Holy Spirit's guidance, we find a theme for the season. Sometimes the theme appears rather easily; sometimes, not. Always the conversation is lively and fun. You ought to pray and ask whether God might be calling you to join us in Celebration Circle.

Often, the seasonal theme will be a bit mysterious; and we hope you will ponder it over the weeks and see how it might connect, for you, with the scripture readings and your own life. At other times, we give you the answer right up front, and this Jubilee is one of those times. Because, as you can see, it's right there in the Reflection we chose, which comes from one of the scriptures for next Sunday, from the first chapter of Colossians: "Christ is the image of the invisible God."

A year ago last August, my brother arrived on my doorstep. He had just been deported from South Korea, where he had been living for more than 35 years. He was without resources, or friends, drinking heavily, and severely ill with bipolar disorder. I had no idea what to do. But, thanks be to God, I had this community, and you stepped up. Jake was my emergency first responder, meeting David with tough love and finding him a place to stay until we could get him connected with support services. Jackie Wallen walked us through the steps to establishing residency and finding treatment providers – a lengthy and complicated process. Sandra contributed her detailed knowledge and experience with Montgomery County

resources. Larry came forward with knowledgeable advice and unfailing encouragement. John told me to go to Al Anon meetings, which gave me a spiritual grounding and direction. And the members of my mission group constantly held us in prayer, continuing throughout the year, and so did many of you, too many for me to name you all, including those of you were praying and I didn't even know it.

Today, my brother David has a home. He lives with two other men in a house connected with Cornerstone Montgomery, a county organization that provides housing and support services for people with mental illness. Coincidentally, our own Michael Novello works for Cornerstone Montgomery as a counselor.

Two months ago, Jake, Jacqie, and June met David and me for dinner at Mark's Kitchen, to celebrate David's first year of sobriety. Things are far from perfect, and there's still a long road ahead and a lot of work – this is life, after all, not a Disney movie. But my brother was dead, and now he lives again. This is the power and the gift of community, of this community. As we've been saying in the Call to Worship all these weeks, "We gather now to worship the invisible God, whose image is all around us."

Before I close, I want to call your attention to the envelopes in your bulletins today. They are for us to make a special offering to help relief efforts in the Philippines. Our Servant Leadership Team members are exploring organizations that might receive our contributions, and they're working with Ron Kraybill, our missionary who just happens to have recently relocated to the Philippines. I don't know about you, but, whenever there's a disaster and then the great wish of so many to be of some help, I'm tempted to think that my contribution will be so small it will be meaningless, it might end up wasted, and there's so much money pouring in right now that maybe I should just wait a few months. But the opportunity to join my contribution with those from all of you in Seekers Church not only adds to the impact I can make, but it also

ensures that I am a part of the people of God working together to make sure that our gifts will do the greatest possible good.

And now, in closing, I invite you to take the music insert from your bulletin. You'll see the refrain to "We Are Not Alone," which we practiced in circle time. The text of this refrain is based on a quote from Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s. With co-founder Peter Maurin, she published The Catholic Worker newspaper, which she sold on the streets of New York City for a penny a copy. The paper was socially and religiously radical; it called for a renewal of the ancient Christian practice of hospitality to those who were homeless. Soon, homeless people began knocking on the door, and Dorothy Day's apartment became the first of many Catholic Worker houses as the movement expanded nationwide.

The verses of this song recall the story in Luke's gospel of the two disciples meeting the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. You remember that they didn't recognize him. As they walked with him their hearts were warmed by his words. Then, they invited him to stay at their house for the night. At dinner, he blessed the bread, broke it, gave it to them, and then they knew who he was.

Here is the full quote, from Dorothy Day's autobiography, titled *The Long Loneliness*:

*"We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship."*