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July 12, 2015

Proper 10 B

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

Breathtaking: tending to cause suspension of regular breathing, a breathless flight, a breathtaking adventure. Inspiring, exciting, astonishing, astounding. Thrillingly or astonishingly beautiful remarkable.

Usually, we use the term "breathtaking" for moments of excitement and beauty. The fireworks on the fourth of July, a sunset over Lake Michigan, a garden in bloom. For many of us, watching the confederate flag being taken down from the capital in South Carolina was a breathtaking moment.

There are also moments of tragedy that take our breath away. The murders in Charleston punched us in our stomach and took our breath away. When many of us heard of the death of Chuck Howell this week, the shock and the sadness took our breath away.

The painting that is reproduced on your liturgy booklet today is breathtakingly gruesome. One description is that it is "breathtakingly matter of fact". The girl is unmoved, her expression blank. The executioner appears detached. The woman seems to be an almost disengaged onlooker. Their attitudes seem almost breathtakingly casual. Their responses: breathtakingly inconsequential.

And yet the work is considered by many to be breathtakingly magnificent. The colors of the painting are exquisite, as is Caravaggio's use of light and darkness. (Part of me is grateful the booklet cover is in black and white). One critic says "Caravaggio has created here a sad commentary on human heedlessness. He has taken a narrative description of martyrdom and captured its disquieting actuality." Painted toward the end of his life, after an attempt has been made on his life, Caravaggio's is perhaps painting a portrait of his own breathtakingly sacred and profane life. Many believe that the face of John the Baptist is Caravaggio's own self portrait.

Breathtaking indeed!

Our reading from Ephesians today can literally take our breath away. Originally verses 3-14 were just one long sentence. Thank God for periods and commas. The author of the letter to the Ephesians gets started and just cannot stop. "Blessed be God who has blessed us in Christ just as he chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love he destined us for adoption according to the good pleasure of his will in him we have redemption and forgiveness according to the riches he has lavished on us according to his good pleasure as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him on heaven and on earth we have obtained an inheritance having been destined so that we might live for the praise of his glory in him we were marked with the seal of the holy spirit as a pledge of our inheritance to the praise of his glory."

Our author breathlessly proclaims the good news that in Christ we are blessed, chosen, destined, forgiven, lavished, gathered, marked and sealed . In Christ, all has been accomplished and all has been made known. In Christ all will be gathered, all will be forgiven, all will be redeemed. In Christ. All.

The reading from Ephesians is meant to take our breath away. It is meant to overwhelm us with excitement, confidence and peace. It is also meant to change the way we live. Because we are so breathtakingly blessed, we are grateful, we are generous, and we are joyful. In Christ we know who we belong to. We have belonged to God from the foundation of the world. In Christ God's plan has been revealed. All will be gathered up in Christ. In Christ we know where we are going. We are destined to share the inheritance of God.

So dear friends, let us be grateful. There is part of each and every one of us that always wishes for more: more wealth, a bigger house, better clothes, a better car, a more luxurious vacation. Not only will all these things pass away in the future, but even when we have them in our hand, we know that they fail to satisfy us. Let us be grateful that we have been pledged a share in the fullness of God. There is nothing on earth that can compare with the inheritance that awaits us. Let us be grateful. In Christ, All. Let us be generous. May we who are daughters and sons of God imitate our creator's generosity. God has generously shared with us, and lavishly enriched us. May we imitate God's generosity and seek to enrich the lives of others.

And dear friends, let us be joyful. Our joy is centered in the resurrection of Jesus. We feel joy when we are in each others' company not because we like each other, not because we agree with each but because we share the inheritance of redemption. We feel joy when we praise God's glory. We feel joy when we share the gift of peace with each other. We feel joy when we bring our gifts to the altar. We feel joy when we sing and pray and break bread together. We feel joy when things go right, and we feel joy when things don't go quite as planned. We feel joy when we are sent to do the work of God in serving the world.

Our is not a childish joy. We know that there is breathtaking violence in the world. We have seen life casually taken, we have seen gruesome executions, we have seen the tragedies of illness, poverty and despair. We know the breathtaking sadness in the world. We know what it is like to feel lost, and broken. We know the death of loved ones and friends. Christians do not deny this pain. Rather, In Christ we know that the violence, suffering, loss and brokenness we see has already been defeated by love. Those of us who knew Chuck Howell are stunned and saddened by his death. His death, like the death of all loved ones hurts. But even in our pain we can rejoice, even in our sadness we can even laugh because we know that in Christ, all will be well. In Christ. All.

In Christ. All. May this good news inspire and astonish us. In Christ, All. May these three words thrill us and astound us. May this good news flow deep into our heart, deep into our lungs. May these three words truly take our breath away.