

**November 15, 2009 – the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Reverend Canon Robert G. Riegel**

**Mark 13:1-8**

When I finished reading the Gospel for today and said, “The Gospel of the Lord” (The Good News of the Lord) I expected some of you might say, “Are you kidding? Where is the good news in that reading?” It is a harsh reading predicting the destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem – which happened in the year 70. And then the predictions of earthquakes, famines, and wars and rumors of wars – all of which are a constant part of human history.

In the midst of it Jesus says to the disciples and to us, “Do not be alarmed – do not live in fear.” And Jesus says, “This is the beginning of the birthpangs” – we can expect that it leads to a new birth, a new creation. And perhaps that is the greatest challenge to Christians today: to live lives of faith and love and not lives of fear and attempts to control. We must be a people of hope and expectation and not a people of despair and sadness.

I spent the past two weeks in Egypt. It was a wonderful trip though physically demanding. It was awesome to stand within pyramids and temples of which I had seen pictures. It was wonderful to spend three days on a ship in Lake Nasser and three days on the Nile itself. We stayed in beautiful hotels in Cairo and Aswan. But...but, never have I so much missed the Christian faith. I have a much deeper realization of how magnificent and freeing and loving is the revelation of God – and how we so often live lives of alarm and fear and not lives of faith and love. And yes it is extremely

hard to be unconditionally loving in a world that is falling apart. It is easy to get pulled into lives of fear and protection.

Egypt is now 85% Muslim. Their president is really a dictator preparing his son to rule. The Muslim faith is one of strict laws and of a God who needs to be pleased by faithful behavior and who will doom people to eternal hell if they do not believe in the right thing or act the right way. It is, I think, an oppressive male dominated, Muslim dominated country. Every place we went we were escorted by guards, dressed in suits and ties but carrying sub-machine guns. I sensed that Americans were not loved, except perhaps for tourist money, though now and then someone would whisper to me Obama, Obama. When they spoke of their God Allah it did not seem at all like a loving God – rather one who needed to be pleased and who would terribly punish those who did not believe. And it seemed to me that as in all religions people seem to become like the god they worship – the Muslim person was not called to love and accept and give freedom. Women are badly treated in a male dominated society and I was shocked to hear that in modern Egypt the circumcision of women was still widely accepted and practiced.

So I realized that I did not fully appreciate being related to a God who is love. Yes, I know that in the Bible there are passages of a harsh and judgmental God – but the clear revelation of God in Jesus Christ is that of a loving Father who desires all of us to be his children and to live, to abide, in his love. Jesus was the outward and visible expression of that love – a love willing to die for us rather than to reject and condemn us. And Jesus calls us to be a part of that loving ministry. I think we still are in need of conversion to a God who loves us completely and absolutely – to a God who gives his

grace and love to us freely without ever being earned or deserved.

Christianity is the only religion with that understanding of a loving God – and I think we often mess it up with all kinds of rules and conditions and threats. And the only thing our God expects of us is to be loving and accepting, forgiving and affirming.

Today we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Too often we get stuck on arguing about the presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Is it transubstantiation as the Catholics teach or consubstantiation as the Lutherans teach or something else? We discuss the presence of Christ in the sacrament and forget the essential truth – by receiving this bread and wine the presence of Christ is within us and we are expected to continue his ministry of unconditional love and acceptance. The world we live in is a mess. But it cannot be saved by alarm and fear. It can only be saved by the love of God and by a people willing to be the vehicle of God's love to a needy world. Please appreciate our faith more fully and please let God empower us away from alarm and into faith and love.

As I heard the reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews I was struck by the words, "Let us provoke one another." If that is all it said we are pretty skilled at that. But the sentence continues, "Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds, and not neglect to worship together." That is my purpose this morning. To provoke myself and you to a deeper love of God and others and to provoke you to regularly meet together to worship and adore God and open ourselves to his so freely given love.