

Today – the next-to-last Sunday after Pentecost – is Bible Sunday. This used to be an official designation. It's not anymore, but we Rectors enjoy a little bit of leeway in these areas, so at Grace – it's Bible Sunday!

The author of Psalm 16 writes, “My boundaries enclose a pleasant land.” An utterly Biblical thought. The Bible, not uniquely but powerfully, establishes and defends boundaries of all sorts, and declares them sacred.

Political boundaries: dividing lines between one people and another, one nation and another. We hold these sacred, in our modern way. There are many positions on the issue of immigration worthy of serious consideration, but they all recognize that the control of borders defines, in part, sovereign nationhood. In this sense, they're holy.

Personal boundaries – defining what we sometimes call “roles”. The Bible draws sharp ones, some of which we've modified or even rejected: between the roles of men and women, of slave and master, of priest and people. Behavioral boundaries get plenty of the Bible's attention, too, defining acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior, attitudes toward wealth, etc.

And metaphysical boundaries: between sacred and profane, divine and human, this life and the next, the living and the dead.

We feel fear when these boundaries are transgressed, or begin to crumble. The reading from Daniel evokes the most fearsome transgression of all: when the dead rise from their graves and walk among the living. Halloween plays on, and with, this fear. The meteoric increase in Halloween's popularity witnesses to its strong and deep hold on our imaginations.

These days we're celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall – a landmark event in the history of human freedom. But if we knew then what we know now, we'd have felt more fear in November of 1989. The crumbling of that iconic boundary unleashed forces in the world of which we knew little, or nothing. Held partly in check by the defining bifurcation of political reality into East and West, Soviet and American, communist and capitalist, democratic and totalitarian, the forces of nationalism, identity politics grounded in race, ethnicity and religion, and historic grievance have come onto the world stage with a vengeance. They perplex and vex us.

And just imagine the soul-shaking fear the apostles, struck by the grandeur of the buildings comprising the temple complex, felt when Jesus told them not a single stone of those buildings would be left on another. The walls of the temple edifices marked the defining boundary between sacred and profane, divine and human. Who would they be, and what would happen, if these boundaries were to disappear?

Fears rise up and seize us when family boundaries shift. What will I do when my big sister isn't around to protect me any more? What will our marriage become when kids come, or when they're gone? Who will we be, one for the other? How will my kids regard me when I get old and need their care and guidance, instead of the other way around? Who will I be for them?

These fears bear witness to the sacred character of boundaries, so consistently attested by the Bible. They bring to mind incidents in Chicago that took place about 15 years ago, and left a lasting impression on me.

In the late '70's I worked at the University of Illinois at Chicago, on the city's near southwest side. Adjacent to the University lay a large tract popularly known as Maxwell St. The site of an immense open-air flea market on Sundays, Maxwell Street provided affordable clothing, furniture and household items to people of modest means or less. Local blues and folk musicians played there, and artists and artisans displayed their handiwork. (Other, more nefarious goods and services were available too, and various kinds of deals were cut. No point in romanticizing the place.) The agency I worked for served people with disabilities, training, placing and supporting them in competitive employment. Many of our clients shopped at the Maxwell St. market.

In the early '90's the University of Illinois hatched plans for expansion, and began to covet Maxwell Street's land. In a matter of 2 or 3 years, U. of I's plans came to fruition. Maxwell Street's boundaries (I remember them well – Halsted St., Racine Av., Roosevelt Rd., 16th St) no longer enclosed a flea market. Dormitories, other kinds of housing and academic buildings began to rise there.

I was shocked. I hadn't shopped at the Maxwell St. market in years, but it had seemed sacrosanct to me, an inviolable piece of the Chicago landscape. I marveled that the U of I could just swallow up an adjacent piece of the near West Side that had played such an important role in the lives of so many people for so many years (you could substitute "George Washington University" and "Foggy Bottom" for "U. of I." and "Near West Side"). The power wielded by the University – buttressed by an ideology that called their expansion "progress", and argued that it's futile to stand athwart its march – seemed scary to me and many others.

We often think of conservative Christians as embracing boundaries. They're the ones, after all, who want to draw a bright line between gender roles, for instance, or between acceptable and unacceptable expressions of sexuality. They find lots of support in the Bible. But they're not the only ones who embrace boundaries and hold them sacred. Those of us, probably most of us here today, who call ourselves "liberal" or "progressive" Christians do too. Just think of the recent initiative to invite discontented Anglicans into the Roman Catholic fold, or the willingness of Anglican bishops outside the U.S. to take U.S. clergy, churches and dioceses under their authority and care. Many of us, me included, are outraged by these transgressions of sacred boundaries. For that matter, there were liberals and conservatives alike on both sides of the Maxwell Street issue. The point? We should remind ourselves regularly that controversies in our world don't usually set those who "cling" to traditional or Biblical boundaries against those who are "open". Much, much more often, conflicts and controversies come down to disagreements about which boundaries are more sacred, and which are less so. Nobody's all that "open" about these sorts of questions.

So we're back to our shared fear. But it's good to remember that fear is not always bad. The Bible enjoins us repeatedly – same words, different books and contexts – that "the fear of the

Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This fear is, first, the soul-shaking emotion felt by the apostles when they heard Jesus’ words about the temple in today’s gospel, and similar emotions we all feel when boundaries crumble or look like they’re going to do so. It’s good to feel this kind of fear. It reminds us of a central Biblical truth: God establishes, defends and sanctifies boundaries.

Part of the Bible’s power, though, lies in its embrace of what we call, using phrases that fall far short of the majesty of Biblical language, “multiple perspectives,” even “contradictory points of view.” Over against boundaries stands the intermittently, unpredictably, un-analyzably apocalyptic character of the divine presence as we encounter it in the Bible.

Apocalyptic: a seminary word, right? Well, yes, but one that carries a pretty clear meaning. Anything “apocalyptic” destroys boundaries we hold sacred – walls, frontiers, barriers, defined roles, statutory restrictions. The fall of the Berlin Wall, or of the twin towers; the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1964 – all of them apocalyptic moments. There are smaller, more personal apocalypses, too, and I’ve already mentioned a few of them: the birth of a child, and the child’s leaving home; aging parents; the death of a spouse, throwing everything we’ve relied on, the whole architecture of our lives, up for grabs – as we heard so poignantly and vividly in this morning’s Adult Forum. Apocalypses all.

Charles Price, the Virginia seminary professor Nancy James and I, and others in this congregation, admired so much and from whom we learned so much, began his introductory theology class by declaring, “Apocalypse is revelation, and revelation is salvation.” Apocalypse is revelation, and revelation is salvation.

The last book of the Bible makes the first dyad explicit: in some translations it’s called the Revelation, in others the Apocalypse. The point could not be clearer. Every apocalypse, small or large, sudden or gradual, personal or public, reveals something – brings something hidden into the light.

For me, the breaching of the boundaries that protected Maxwell Street revealed something that’s informed what I’ll grandiosely call “my public ministry” ever since: “progress” isn’t always progress; and, the message of its apostles aside, its “march” is not entirely irresistible. We ought to study the lost causes of history, that of Maxwell Street’s defenders among them. Sometimes we can take up struggles like theirs, in a new time and different circumstances, and bring them to fruition.

Here’s a closer-to-home, more personal example. Last night, we had dinner with Rob, a former colleague of Sakena’s, and his wife and daughter. The waiter delivered our food and Rob’s daughter reached across the table to Rob’s plate, grabbed his bread and started to eat it. Rob looked both startled and amused. His wife said, “Rob, for Simone there is no boundary between your food and hers.” A tiny little apocalypse that some of you younger parents might recognize, revealing something important about Rob’s life from here on out.

Apocalypse, in all its forms, is revelation. The finger of God touches and transgresses sacred boundaries in order to bring hidden things, unrecognized truths, into the light. Here, as in all things, the fear of God – reverence, humility, watchfulness, distrust of our own “wisdom” – is the beginning of real wisdom.

And revelation is salvation. So often, what we can't see, won't see, aren't yet able to recognize, reveals what's truest about us, and bring us closer to each other and to God. Only apocalypses, large and small, can reveal these things to us. Once revealed, they begin to set us free, to save us. The apocalypses of our lives are, as Jesus says, the birth pangs of a new revelation, a new order coming forth from God. We catch only glimpses. We have to trust. But every revelation, every new order born of God is, by definition, and the anxiety-shaped appearances that often bedevil us to the contrary, good.

Nowhere does Dr. Price's three-part trajectory – apocalypse is revelation, revelation is salvation – come across more vividly, or with greater power, than in the teaching of the Letter to the Hebrews about Jesus' sacrifice. In Hebrews, Jesus himself, his body, is the boundary between heaven and earth, divine and human. On the cross this body, this boundary, is, by divine plan and foreknowledge, torn asunder. Through this breaching of the boundary, we receive full access to God. The letter invites, even enjoins, us to approach the throne of grace with boldness. In a way, though, no approach on our part is necessary. God has approached us with boldness. Through the sundered boundary of Christ's body, the Spirit of God has come into the world to do God's work. Mostly this Spirit affirms our boundaries, but sometimes, for God's own reasons, its presence turns apocalyptic. We are afraid. Remember, in these moments, that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Watch and wait; rebuke anxiety, be slow to judge; something is coming from the darkness into the light. These things the Bible teaches us. On this Bible Sunday, we seek to remember them.