Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

The meditations of my heart this Sunday sermon will start with a question, and it is not a trick question.

What do the phrases

“You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”    *and*

“He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

*have in common?*

*This is your time to be interactive. I will take suggestions…. what do the phrases have in common?*

*Okay, they are both from scripture.*

*“one commonality is death: in one we have “we will die” and the other “they will be put to death”*

*and I will draw attention to who is speaking in these passages?   Is it God or are the people speaking?*

*And there we have it. The people are speaking.*

Isn’t it interesting?  people are so darn predictable.  Whether these people are in the time of Exodus or Jesus’s time frame or this past week, people are preditable.  Even following this week’s horrible mass shooting, Southern Baptist preacher Pat Robinson framed the massacre in Las Vegas Nevada in terms of God’s retribution for people not respecting the office of the president. Many people have their own ideas, thoughts, theology around where this country is and is headed and why, but I think that one of the core things that scripture teaches us, in particular in this week’s lessons,  is to not think for God.  Persoanlly I think this to be a very good thing.  I find it a daunting task even to think for another person, and I sure don’t want to think for God. I do believe that is out of my league and definitely out of my pay grade.

Our Old Testament passage today from Exodus gives us one version of the ten commandments.  There is simplicity in the passage. The first four commandments have to do with God and the Sabbath (which by extension is about God and God’s holiness and resting on the Sabbath because we are to be in the image of God and we are to rest as God rests).  Of these first four, three are prohibitions, and one (the one about the Sabbath) is a command to rest.  The next six are prohibitions about how you are not supposed to treat one another. And so, this scares the pants off the people. And since they were wearing tunics, that’s okay. Seriously though, this is what scares them. Treat God with respect and don’t be a shmuck. And we all know better, and all fail, and are afraid that God is going to get us for our failures.

And so in the story of the tenants, what scares the listeners is they know in that story that they are the shmucks. And they know their transgressions against God is ever before them.    And so when Jesus answers the people who think the owner of the vineyard (in other words God)  “will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Jesus responds with text from Isaiah:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’?

Remember that Jesus was a Jew. Be careful not to apply a backwards reading to the text. Although we now think of Jesus as the ultimate chief cornerstone, and certainly he could have used this text as foreshadowing, instead remember who he usually calls out and place this in the context of what he was teaching. It is unlikely that Jesus is calling out Jews for not recognizing him as God’s son, but he is likely calling out the leaders for not doing God’s work, for being hypocrites.  At the time of the scripture of Isaiah, the passage that Jesus quotes refers to all prophets. People are forever turning away from prophets, stumbling over them you could say.  And yet the prophets are the ones who point to God, they are the ones who walk closely with God.  Jesus draws this into focus.  Pay attention to the cornerstones.  Worry less about tripping over them or if they are going to hit you in the head and crush you. Follow them, draw strength from them, let them point you to God.

And so in both the Old and New Testament readings today, people expect punishment. And instead we know that we get redemption, We expect condemnation, but we get salvation, despite what we merit in failing to keep the law and do the right thing.  God always turns the tables on our expectation and doesn’t act as we think God would. And we know how this story turns out, we know that Christ died and rose for us and yet we still have a hard time believing  that God loves us. Instead God uses the very manner of our resistance to God’s love— our killing of the landownner’s son, to redeem us. As Paul writes in his letter to the Phillipians, there is no righteousness in us or the tenants of the vineyards, or the Israelites who are scared to encounter God, there is no righteousness in any of us on our own by how we live in the law.

Instead righteousness comes through faith in Christ; it is the righteousness from God based on faith. We, like Paul, have the opportunity to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow we, like Paul, may attain the resurrection from the dead.

We, like Paul, have not already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but we too press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own.

So Beloved, press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus, for to answer the call is to produce fruits of the kingdom.