

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.21.24

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (397)

When Jesus saw that the people, now gathered on the shore where Jesus was approaching in a boat, were like sheep without a shepherd, he had compassion for them, and he began to teach them many things.

That's always struck me as odd, that Jesus' solution to the people's crowded distress is to *teach* them. Here they were, like sheep without a shepherd, and his solution was to teach them.

I don't know much about actual shepherding, but I do think it involves little of teaching. You can't really teach sheep. You can only goad them and guide them and trust that, for better or for worse, they'll leave the thinking to you.

What had got them all to this state of crowding agitation, like sheep without a shepherd, was Jesus having sent out apostles in his name to do what he'd been doing, making present the Kingdom of God and thus changing everything in his midst.

That was essentially Jesus' work according to the gospel of Mark. Jesus was uniquely, singularly the very manifestation of the kingdom of God, the one in whom is fully and immediately present the reign and will of God. For this, when Jesus would arrive in a place, it would reorder everything. When people approached him, it would restore them, renew them, or complete them, perfect them.

Much as I love the Gospel According to Mark, I've often struggled with it when it comes to preaching. When it comes to preaching on this particular gospel narrative, what is it that I should say for what it is we're to do? In response to the so-called Christ event and the subsequent call of the gospel, what is it we're to do, and therefore what is it I should say in service of that? I mean, if Jesus is singular in his capacity, if Jesus is uniquely the arrival and presence of the eternal reign of God, as Mark understands him to be, then what is it we should do in response to that? What is it we *could* do in response to that? We're not Jesus. You: you're not Christ.

What makes it all the more challenging is that Mark's gospel doesn't see much actual effectiveness in the disciples. They're usually hapless, bumbling. They squabble among themselves and fail to understand.

Not here though. This time, sent out as apostles, it seems they've been quite effective, so much so that crowds of people have come out to them, to be touched by the presence that changes everything, restores everything or perfects everything.

How we conceive of that action, for what it's worth, tells us about how we imagine our living in theological time. Is the goal that Christ sets for us a restoration to some original wholeness or is it a completion to some creative endeavor not yet finished? Are we to return or are to arrive?

Christianity has it both ways, a deeply conservative endeavor which would have us return to an original state of grace *and* a tirelessly progressive endeavor which would have us press on to God's good and sure end, perfection, completion, consummation. It is both/and. It is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega.

The word "repent" means both return and a transformation of mind to conceive of something beyond, ever beckoning and ever beyond.

One thing Mark's gospel does indicate to us when it comes to Jesus as the immediately made-present reign of God is what God's will is, what God's presence looks like in actual fact. It looks like healing. It looks like soothing, justice and peace.

Time was people accepted their lot in life. Time was, if you had a withered hand, you just accepted it. There was nothing you could do about, so perhaps there's nothing you should do about it. Maybe your withered hand is God's will for you. Maybe that's what you deserve. I mean, think about it. Are you so great that you *shouldn't* have a withered hand? Are you so exceptional that you, of all people, should have *two* healthy, functioning hands? Come on. It's not like you're the emperor. Or even in his court. Make do. You've got one good hand. Isn't that enough for you?

But Jesus: Jesus thrown everything off balance. That's what the Misfit said, in Flannery O'Connor's shocking short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The Misfit was both violence embodied, senseless violence, and also the bearer of grace and truth, which is often the way with Flannery O'Connor. Often in her short stories, grace arrives with some terrible breakout of shocking violence, a book thrown at your face, a truck backed over you, a bullet in your head. Cold comfort: O'Connor's bringing of grace.

Mark's Jesus doesn't arrive as grace with any such attending death, but there is a certain form of violence. If the non-violence we insist upon in life is a maintaining of the status quo, then God's grace will be felt as violence. If by peace we mean that things are to remain as they are, undisturbed, then Jesus will come as real disturbance, a breaking of things. Especially to those deeply invested in the status quo, the powerful, those whose ride through history has them buoyed above it all, Jesus' arrival and presence will be felt as offense.

No wonder Herod was afraid, he who *rightfully* sat on the throne.

Rightfully.

There's an interesting resurgence of some understandings of power happening in global politics. There's a rise of people who don't believe in equality, who don't believe it's true and therefore don't aim to pursue it in our politics. They believe in an elite who are rightful in their holding power and wielding power. It's an old Nietzschean idea that fueled the Fascists of the 20th century, and that liberal democracy thought itself to have defeated, but that's making a comeback because liberal democracy is slow and decadent and has so many internal contradictions that it can only hardly stand itself, to say nothing of defend itself.

No coincidence, those who believe in a naturally-appointed ruling elite also believe themselves among this naturally-appointed ruling elite. Indeed, to see this as the true state of

things is to be among that elite. Most people don't know. Most people believe in equality among all people, believe it even as a truth self-evident, that all men are created equal.

But not these more-knowing elite—which is actually one of the signs of having been chosen for this elite position, that you *know* the irreversible fact, which only a tiny few can see and know and accept and therefore can rightly rule, that most are the people who are born for toil. Most are the people who will be mined by history and whose labor in life will be extracted as raw material for the buoying up of the elite who will, for their part, bring order, and therefore freedom, to the world and even to the masses—if freedom of a sort, freedom of the sort that good order brings. Us plebes: you, you plebe: you won't have access to abundance. No, on the contrary, you'll be exploited by your superiors. But you won't be exploited by your equals—so there's that. Though your king might take your property, your neighbor won't—so there's that. Though the chairman-president-ruler-Übermensch might claim your work as theirs to be squeezed for their own wealth and wellbeing, at least your neighbor won't be able to manage such an offense.

Equality can't promise that. No, equality means that could happen at any time because, if all men are created equal, then who's gonna make sure that plays out right?

J.D. Vance. His life must be one enormous question mark, not least to himself. The nominee for Vice President on the Republican ticket, he managed the magic trick of getting out of Appalachia, which can be a trap for many reasons. Multi-generational settling in, a cultural eschewing of formal education, an extractive economy built on coal-mining wherein local wealth gets extracted and exported for use elsewhere and to the well-being of corporate fat-cats, the ravages of drugs and addiction, the geographic isolation of all those woods and hills: it's a culture I certainly can't claim as my own, but it is one to which I've been a neighbor of sorts

Having grown up on the seacoast of New Hampshire, I was raised in a bubble of bourgeois striving while just beyond was multi-generational acceptance, if not resigning. In fact, the big threat of the regional high school to which I'd have gone was the "Brookers," the kids from Seabrook, who were known to be crazy, violent, and only hardly wedged out of their ramshackle settlements in the sandy loam out of which they eked a living. My mother was, in fact, for a time a teacher in their elementary school, where some of the kids were only very hardly taught: she really loved teaching there. They even had their own dialect. The subject of a doctoral dissertation in the 80s, this dialect was found to be a kind of Shakespearean English, not spoken anywhere else but in a small area of West Virginia and another in Maryland.

Strange then, isn't it, that from this same high school graduated Maura Healy, our governor, having soon after made it over the state line, safely into higher-minded Massachusetts, though raised in the very next town over from Seabrook.

How do you explain that?

I mean, maybe she was born with it, some in-born trait that set her among the elite. Or maybe it's Maybelline, something more of artifice eked out of equality. (Has a corporate slogan ever more incisively hit upon some enduring socio-political conundrum—the natural elite “born with it” verses the artful fashioned of otherwise essential equality, “Maybelline”?)

J.D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* wrestles with this question, as I remember the book, it having been a while since I read it. How did he manage to get from the legacy of poverty and addiction to the Ivy League? How did he pull it off? And might others pull it off, and if so what would be required of the structuring of things to make it so? Could others follow in the path his footsteps made, which maybe he could make even clearer? Or is he unique, is he as one born for something greater than hard-scrabbling in the hills, so the structuring of things really wouldn't matter? And what does each of these two choices mean for when he comes into ever-greater power? Is to rule or to empower? Is he, and others like him, to rule or to teach?

Are we, who remain in the wooded hills, sheep or are we something more teachable than that?

This story doesn't resolve the question. Jesus sees us both as sheep and as teachable. But Mark's Jesus suggests one who was born to rule, someone singular, someone unlike others. And one of the first things he does in his ministry, according to every gospel narrative, all four (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is appoint an elite, the twelve disciples, seen here after they'd finally met with some success and now needed some rest. And then there's the crowd, which, it's worth noticing, is distinct from the twelve in every telling of the story.

But what the disciples, when sent out as apostles, *do*: what they *do* is suggestive of something important. They bring healing to everyone. They bring restoration or completion to all who come near, those who come of their own agency and those who come because others bring them—which is the essential sign that the reign of God has come near, that those who were suffering are no longer, that those in distress are brought to peace. This means that God's will is healing for all, is wholeness, an end to suffering, a settling in of peace for all. And this means you don't actually have to accept your lot in life as an expression of God's will for you. You can hope

for a life less toilsome, less humiliating, less painful, more gratifying. You can hope for cause to hope. That is your Christian inheritance.

I've had cause recently to work with a young person who takes nearly no initiative on things. If he were anyone else, I'd assume this as entitlement, the sense among many young people (like me, when I was young) that he shouldn't have to help with the laundry, she shouldn't have to empty the dishwasher: "No one other than the lame-o whose job it should have to clean up after me, certainly not me myself. I'm busy studying for the SATs so I can get into a good school and be done with you dummies." In the case of this young person, I suspect it's something else. It's more a sense of resignation that no attempt will make life any more orderly or manageable, and such things don't matter anyway. Life is full of broken garbage, which includes all the people you know. Nothing you do is going to change that—and that's actually fine.

And maybe it is.

But if it's not, then you have a right to change it, and you'd be right to think God intends for you dignity as much as He does intend dignity for anyone else.

The quality that distinguishes the leadership of Jesus in this story is a crucial one. It's not simply full access to the power of God. It's not some in-born or even acquired trait of excellence. It's this: it's compassion. "...he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

The Greek word that translates into the English, "compassion," has as its root *splangcha*, which means guts, that deep seat of feeling in a person, that place of sacrifice in a person. When an animal is offered as a sacrifice in the Temple, its guts are the location of the truest aspect of the sacrifice, its *splangcha*. Sacrificial love, then, self-giving love: it comes from the gut, and it's translated here compassion.

The Latin of the word is just as compelling. *Passio* is suffering, so com-passion is a willingness to suffer with.

All of which is to suggest that Jesus is the rightful king not because he manifests the power and presence of God but because doing so stems from compassion, a willingness to suffer with those who are suffering and by which to have that suffering relieved.

This is all the clearer when you consider what the people are said to be saying to Jesus, begging him "that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak..." This "begging" is the Greek *parakalein*, which becomes the name for the Holy Spirit upon its arrival, the Paraclete. *Parakalein* is to call to one's side or to advocate, the Paraclete being called in English the Advocate. To beg in

these terms, then, is to beg someone to advocate for you, to beg someone to take your side. In the argument of life, in the court of true justice, to have God take your side, to have God take each and every side.

I believe in equality, which isn't the same as believing in uniformity or sameness. To say all people are created equal is to say all are equally in need of and deserving of dignity and respect and access to resources according to the life they long to live. I believe this because the gospel strongly suggests that, though people will occupy different positions in the world, all are bound for wholeness and wellness, happiness and peace.

Easy to say, hard to do. But it is, I believe, what we're to do.

Thanks be to God.