8th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.26.20

1 Kings 3:5-12
At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should
give you."[6] And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father
David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart
toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to
sit on his throne today.[7] And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of
my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.[8] And
your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous
they cannot be numbered or counted.[9] Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to
govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great
people?"[10] It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.[11] God said to him, "Because you have
asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but
have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,[12] I now do according to your word.
Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like
you shall arise after you.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
He put before them another parable: "**The kingdom of heaven** is like a mustard seed that someone
took and sowed in his field;[32] it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the
greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its
branches."[33] He told them another parable: "**The kingdom of heaven** is like yeast that a woman
took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."[44] "**The kingdom of
heaven** is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes
and sells all that he has and buys that field.[45] "Again, **the kingdom of heaven** is like a merchant in
search of fine pearls;[46] on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and
bought it.[47] "Again, **the kingdom of heaven** is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught
fish of every kind;[48] when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets
but threw out the bad.[49] So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate
the evil from the righteous[50] and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping
and gnashing of teeth.[51] "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes."[52] And he said to
them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of
a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (552)

My family hiked a lot when I was a kid. Once, when I was maybe eight years old, standing on a peak, looking down into a green valley, I watched as the shadows of clouds made their way across the landscape. It was a revelation. I mean, I'd often talked about when "the sun went in." Like, when you were outside playing with your friends, and it was sunny, but then "the sun went in." It would be back out in a few minutes, you knew. But for now, the sun had gone in.

It hadn't, of course. The sun hadn't gone anywhere. It's that a cloud had wafted its way between the sun and where you were standing, and was now casting a shadow where you were standing. But I'd been speaking in terms that fixed my understanding, limited my imagining. Only the seeing of this phenomenon first from within, and then from above, had me actually understanding what it was all about.

I think of this moment of revelation a lot, to be honest, maybe more than it merits. I think about it as a theological, even Christological revelation. I thought about it this week when coming across Solomon's admission that he didn't know "how to go out or come in."

It's thought to be a military reference—something about conquest and retreat. But it comes to that specific because of something more general—simply being able to see a thing from inside the thing, and from outside it, which enables an understanding informed by experience but also now by reason. It lends wisdom. It lends compassion.

Have you ever seen a dog, post-surgery or injury, wearing a "cone of shame"? Part of the pathos of it is that the dog doesn't understand why normally easy things to do are suddenly so difficult, like getting through a doorway or getting up the stairs. We can see from above what the dog can only see from within.

One of the qualities about Jesus that I find most compelling is his constantly, according to the gospel narratives, going in and going out. It's a mundane enough movement, as he goes into houses and out of them, into villages and out of them, out to the wilderness and then back into civilization, out to the river to be baptized and then back into the city or region. These are none particularly profound; people go in and out of things all the time—houses, cars, towns. But taken together they suggest something of the incarnation itself—the incarnation of God in human form, the coming amidst history and the creation the one who is Lord of all history and maker of all creation. This is the move of the imminent transcendent, the one who is as close as your own breath and who transcends over all being. Indeed, the one who *is* Being became *a* being—and it lent new understanding, new compassion for what we're all up against in this life. For it's not only about what we've done, but also about what we've been up against, right?

As you might have surmised, I've been reading tomes regarding the "Modern Era" lately, which is to say the last 500 years. I've been wanting to get a perspective on things that's less embedded, more holistic. I've been trying to figure out lately, basically, "What on the earth is

going on? Why is it like this? And has it always been like this? And was it inevitable that it'd be like this?" If that puts me in the same camp as Solomon, then I've broken one of the basic rules of preaching: never be the hero of your sermon. (Solomon, though, wasn't that great a man, when all was said and done.)

But I can relate to Solomon's confessed insight that he doesn't know how to go out or come in, and that he wants to. Moreover, he *needs* to have, "an understanding mind" in order "to govern the people," an ability "to discern between good and evil." His being "amidst the people," embedded among them, he seemed to think, obscured his vantage point, made impossible the sort of discernment essential, but so elusive, so to tell between good and evil—that incapacity that has dogged us since the beginning.

Remember? This, this thing from which our Creator might even be thought to have wanted to protect us from? "Of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall die." Because knowing that there are such things as good and evil isn't the same thing as knowing how to tell them apart, or knowing how to disentangle them from one another. Just because we know that there *is* good and there is evil doesn't mean we know what to do about it all. So maybe we'd be better off simply not knowing. That there even are such things, that there's even a differentiation to be made: remember when, as a baby, you'd reach for anything with your line of sight and stick in your mouth? There's something to be said for that level of living.

It's not for nothing that Solomon went to a high place to offer sacrifice there. He did this instead of offering sacrifice in Jerusalem, where it was right and proper to do. The Holy City of the people, Jerusalem was the place where even the Ark of the Covenant now resided, Solomon's father, David, having won it back from the Philistines to bring it home. So, Jerusalem was now the undisputed place for worship and sacrifice.

But Solomon sought out another place, a *higher* place. Gibeon, northwest of Jerusalem, offered a view of the city. It also might have felt out from under the shadow of Solomon's revered father. David had been a great man—a shepherd and musician, who became king of Judah as a young man, who dominated in war and won the northern kingdom of Israel, creating of the two (Judah and Israel) a United Kingdom. He had won back the Ark of the Covenant and brought

into the Holy City. So, maybe Solomon sought out Gibeon because some things never change, like sons who reject the ways of their successful fathers.

He might also have sought it out because he knew in this vantage point there was something of the wisdom he desired. After all, he'd gone to Gibeon to offer a sacrifice, according to the story, a thousand times before. But now the Lord came to him in a dream while he slept in that (what's noted as a) principal high place. The Lord came in a dream. Solomon asked for and received an ability to discern between good and evil, which is to say an understanding mind. And the first thing Solomon did in response to receiving this new capacity was to go to Jerusalem to offer his sacrifice there.

Suddenly he knew this as good and right.

This is a story of establishment. Something here, that was promised in Moses, and first won in David, is now being established in Solomon—the Promise Land in Moses, the conquered and settled place in David, the building up of the Temple and the Temple cult in Solomon.

The stories of the kings of Judah and Israel are what mostly what comprise the content of the books of 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, and 1st and 2nd Chronicles. And they hold as a standard for success or failure of each of these kings and their reign over the people the question as to how obediently the nation adhered to the Law of Moses, the Torah. The happenings of history as regards Israel and Judah during this 500-year span are all measured and explained by how well the kings had the people live in adherence with the Law.

These history books of the Old Testament were mostly written around the end of the reign of kings, in the time around when the Assyrian Empire first encroached and then the Babylonian Empire attacked and overtook. This is to say this whole section of the Hebrew Bible is itself a holistic look at the atomized happenings of history. For this, they looked back on this half a millennium of relative stability, from the year 1000 to the year 586, and measured each king's reign by the standard of how well the king had the people live loyal to God's law. Good fortune befalling the nation meant the king managed to get the people to live in accordance with the law. Bad fortune befalling the nation meant the king was tempting the people away from living in accordance with the Law.

When the people and their king were good, good things happened to them. When the people and their king were bad, bad things happened to them. This just made sense. Because there

has to be some way of understanding what happens, right? There has to be some explanation for why good things happen, and why bad things happen. It all has to be tied somehow to how well we're doing—history as a series of punishments and rewards.

Because otherwise we're just too out of control to be tolerable. Otherwise, history's happenings have nothing to do with us, and we just ride the tides of happenstance and the inevitable—that is, when the tides aren't tidal waves that ride over us.

Of course, there might be a middle way. It might be that we are both active agent and also that which is acted upon—but that's a whole other thing. That's graduate-level ethics and political theory. Solomon, whose legacy to us is all about his singular wisdom, got as muddled amidst history as anyone. Following that moment of dream-state clarity, and that prayer for capable discernment, and the singular event that followed as regarded two women, one baby, and a dispute as to whom was its mother, Solomon's life became a lot more complicated. His ruling of the United Kingdom made it so they had terrific influence over the whole region, even land that didn't fall under its direct rule. Solomon's building of his palaces and gardens and public parks and eventually the Temple opened up avenues for trade and cultural influence. The whole mood of the kingdom was more cosmopolitan than ever, an intermixing of people of all sorts—which brought all the inevitable complications.

Was it good or bad that the people weren't so pure in their practice and their living?

Was it right or wrong that Judeans and Israelites were comfortable with Syrians and Edomites and Ammonites and Hittites?

Was it okay or not okay that the Temple itself had cedar from Lebanon and gold from Phoenicia and stone that King Hiram of Tyre had provided in trade, along with some architects and stone masons? The Temple, of all things! This was to be a site of purity and holiness, and at its very foundations is syncretism, intermixing. What are to make of it all?

History would judge, but even its judgment would be muddled, an uneasy conclusion that Solomon was great! But not that great.

Jesus' parables seem pointed for bringing this uneasiness home to his disciples—and to us.

This kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. And never mind that no one would *sow* mustard seed in his field. Never mind that mustard is something you'd want to eradicate from your field. Never mind, for this is as the kingdom of

heaven, which apparently also has such a persistent, but also disruptive, way about it. It enters into an environment and eventually it becomes the all in all—even though it's the smallest of seeds, even though it's as tiny as a touch, or as irrelevant as a glanced connection, or as pathetic as the human heart opened in need or in desire or in hope or in creative expression or in longing for connection or an urging for justice, all of which (all of which!) ruin the progress of the powers and principalities of the world to further their power and to dehumanize their subjects and to subjugate their territory. It makes for chaos, no clean lines. It takes over everything: the kingdom of heaven. Psht.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. And never mind that leaven, which is to say yeast, is the result of decay, that too much of it can spoil bread dough, that left to molder too long it can become rancid, even lethal. Never mind also that it's form of reproduction is self-generating, is creepy, I tell you. (I watched a time-lapse video taken through a microscope. It's *creepy!)* It literally creeps across what environment it's taking over. Left alone, yeast will grow and take over dough, both prior to baking it and afterward. It consumes its host until it's the all in all.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid. And never mind that this treasure-hunter was apparently hunting in someone else's field. Never mind also that this one had no compunction to be anything but duplicitous about what he found. Can he be thought *worthy* of this treasure?

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. But what of the one from whom he bought it? A fool for not recognizing what gem he was willing to let go, should he have been let in on his folly?

And then there's this one—the least puzzling of them, the least upsetting of a worldly demand for some measure of just desserts. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad."

This parable appears in Matthew's gospel only. There's nothing like it in any of the other two, neither Mark, our earliest extant synoptic gospel, nor Luke, the one contemporaneous with Matthew but written by a Gentile for a Gentile church.

The fact that this is in Matthew alone, that there is indeed something very Matthean about this, has me mindful of poor Matthew, a righteous Jew, though one now convicted in Christ, writing for a congregation of righteous Jews, though all now convicted in Christ, and a few, though growing number of, Gentiles—these whose habits of living were so different from one another, these whose understanding of God was so different from one another. Embedded in an intense and conflicted context, Matthew, it seems, longed for clarity on the question as to which way was right and which was wrong. As a once-law-abiding Jew, he was likely accustomed to the sense that righteousness was a clear thing to live out. As someone who seems to have become deeply disappointed in the Jewish authorities of his day (a rage in his writing that you don't find in other gospel narratives), he was also, and perhaps newly, resigned to the likelihood that he would never himself come to absolute clarity on the question of good and evil, right and wrong—especially not now that Jesus changed up the game.

So, his was, he perhaps now understood, merely to keep the congregation from splitting apart, splitting along the line of Jew-Gentile. And this he would do by holding out the promise that there *would* be judgment at the end of the age, that people *could* rest assured it would all be sorted out, that they could in the meantime just try to make it work, that good enough would be good enough.

I don't know a lot about the development of the doctrine of redemption, and more interesting the evolution in the imagining of the divine action of redemption, the question as to whom shall be saved? I do plan to find out. I have two books on order which should bring me up to speed. Meanwhile, I do know that we Moderns are lured by what Jacques Barzun calls Primitivism, the "longing to shuffle off the complex arrangements of an advanced culture." He claims we modern Protestants have a double portion of this, in that the Protestant Reformation was itself energized by the urge to return to the origins of the gospel, to strip away all the trappings of tradition and the Church so to get back to basics—the Bible, the baptized believer, the Holy Spirit, maybe a preacher.

For this, we display a knee-jerk preference for what came earliest. For this, in a lot of Protestant thinking, there's a pronounced preference for the Gospel of Mark, as this is the earliest, a preference strongly over the Gospel of John, which is the latest and the most theological

sophisticated. (Paul's letters are preferred over both as these are the very earliest texts in the New Testament, the ones that come to us from closest in time to when Jesus lived.)

But I like sometimes to counter this assumption, which I carry around just as Mr. Barzun knew I would. Because why assume that the earliest confessors of this astounding new revelation made in the Christ event would come to the best thinking about it all—the truest, the wisest? Why assume those closest to the time of Jesus alive in the world would know best and understand deepest what that had been all about? If Christ was so singular, so unprecedented and historically pivotal, then why should the first and earliest thinking about Christ's full meaning be thought categorically the best?

What if Matthew's doctrine of redemption was just too limited?

What if Matthew's vision of the eschaton, the day of judgment, wasn't radical enough to keep pace with the radical nature and purpose of Jesus Christ?

Maybe Matthew was simply too embedded in his culture and its concerns fully to have come to terms with what redemption in Christ implies, even insists upon.

Matthew imagines the judgement of God as coming coupled with condemnation—that there are those who are clearly worthy of condemnation, just as there are those who are clearly worthy of glory.

But a view from the vantage point of having come in and gone out suggests something far more complicated. That all of us are worthy of condemnation, that all of us are complicit in the sin of history, that none of us is so disconnected from our worldly context as to be untouched by corruption or untainted by its corrosive effect, we are each and all of us born into history, and its torture, twisted inheritance to us, that all of us exist as amidst a vineyard long ago planted whose crops are grapes of wrath perhaps even more than grapes for sweet wine.

Shall we, then, get what we deserve, Matthew?

Good heavens, man! If each is paid everyone what each deserves, would anyone ever escape a whipping?

Hamlet wondered that, thanks to Shakespeare, meaning it took a millennium and a half to so wondrously, anxiously play with what redemption in Christ might actually look like.

Everything.

All of us.

The whole of the creation, worked free of sin, squeezed of the wine of wrath, labored over and through to bear forth new and perfect life—a world in which a germ of the good fell to the earth and germinated there so to begin a strange, astonishing spread, a contagion of the good until it had its grips on all.

We're used to the idea that one bad apple can spoil the bushel. What about one good apple redeeming the bushel?

"Absurd!" you say.

We're used to the idea that one exposure to the virus can disrupt a whole settled nation and culture. We are indeed entirely *too* used to this by now. What about one exposure disrupting a settled nation and culture, but for the good?

Absurd, you say? Then it is perhaps a matter of faith.

If this was entirely too magnanimous a thing for Matthew to grasp but fifty years after the event that was such a germ in the world, then who could blame him? It's as big a thing as there is, so not to get the whole of it right away seems forgivable, understandable.

That said, how about we grasp it now? How about we entertain the possibility that God is not limited by our insistence that fair is fair?

The Christian world is, at this moment, arguing again over this question. One prominent, observant theologian recently proclaimed *That All Shall Be Saved,* this indeed the title of his book, this being one of the two books I have on order. It's provoked the true believers in hell to argue in its favor as vociferously as ever. It's a hard doctrine to defend, knowing what we know now. Our view as late moderns is too high and too deep into human history and the human being to confess a God who would be so tragically limited in the power to redeem as to rely on such a thing as hell. It might stand to our gut-level insistence that fair is fair. It doesn't stand to reason, and it doesn't stand amidst the parables that Jesus most often told.

This is complicated. But it will one day become very simple—the kingdom of heaven, the all in all.

So, I'll see you in heaven. Let's not hurry to get to get there. Or, even better, let's live in its midst starting now.

Thanks be to God.