

10th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 13A
Sermon 8.6.23

Isaiah 55:1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (359)

"When Jesus heard this..." is how the lection begins today, though it doesn't tell us what he heard.

Which is weird because what he heard was decisive. It spurred him to a decision, to an action.

Weirder still because it was an action out of the ordinary, for him anyway. It had him withdraw, on a boat, to a deserted place, by himself. This after spending most of the gospel narrative to this point with the intent, or at least to the effect, of gathering crowds, gathering disciples. Now, all of a sudden, he withdraws, on a boat, to a deserted place, by himself, which, by the way, is putting quite insistently, stating it in four ways, how very alone he suddenly needed to be.

It makes one wonder what he heard.

This is what he heard: that John the Baptizer had been beheaded at Herod's birthday party and that John's disciples had then gone to Herod's palace to collect the headless body from the

dungeon where it was left so they could bury it, bury him, or at least most of him, from which burial they then went and told Jesus.

And when Jesus had heard this, he withdrew, on a boat, to a deserted place, by himself.

Any maybe you know all the back story—that over dinner, Herod’s stepdaughter, Salome, had danced for Herod’s dinner guests and had pleased his guests so much that Herod said Salome could have anything she asked for. So, what she asked for, at her mother’s prompting, was John the Baptizer’s head on a platter.

And it should come as no surprise that her mother would ask for such a thing, her mother, Herodias who had been Herod’s brother’s wife but whom Herod decided he wanted for himself, so he had his brother killed and he married his sister-in-law, who was also now his wife, thus making his niece now also his step-daughter while still also a source of entertainment for his guests at his birthday dinner.

None of which was lawful, a fact which John the Baptizer never stopped declaring. This whole palace grotesquerie was thoroughly against Jewish law—which Herod was, though a brutal arm of the Roman Empire, also a Jew in Jerusalem and therefore answerable to the Law, which John the Baptizer, in his rock-ribbed zeal, never stopped declaring all this as breaking the Law, though John had to have known that this was also to put his own life at risk.

Which is why Herodias wanted him dead.

Though Herod had punted on the matter. Herod settled for simply imprisoning him in his palace because he feared the crowds and what they might do if he put this prophet to death, but also because, as the Gospel of Mark notes, Herod liked to listen to John talk.

I wonder if what Herod liked in this was encountering someone who actually had courage, someone who actually had principles.

And tradition has had it that Salome was seductive while Herodias was treacherous, ambitious, power-hungry. But I think it could just as easily be the case that Herod, who seems to have had in equal measure power, cruelty, and stupidity, was someone whom you didn’t cross. When he set his sights on you, you either went along or you were killed. So, how free was Herodias in her apparent trade up from a husband near the throne to one on the throne? And how free was young Salome to say, “I don’t actually want to dance for your birthday party guests. I think I’ll just stay in my chamber for the evening.” No, it’s possible that one way these two women who found themselves caught in the imperial web of an unworthy king could exercise any agency at all was to take away from Herod the one thing he liked: John.

I don't admire Herodias. But I don't blame her either. As for Salome, I'd really just like to give her something comfortable to throw on and a safe place to watch a movie or talk on the phone with her friends.

What Jesus wanted, what he *needed*, was to withdraw, on a boat, to a deserted place, by himself.

Because John had been his almost-everything. His cousin, according to the Gospel of Luke only about six months older than Jesus, and much later his herald, as one who went before him into the world, declaring, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" John could also be assumed as going before Jesus now into death, cruel death on the whim of imperial power, pointless in the eyes of the world, which is to heap upon the humiliation of it all further humiliation. "Your life means nothing. Your death means even less, except in its power to amuse." Where went John, so went Jesus. So, what would Jesus do about that?

Yeah, what was Jesus gonna do about that?

I wonder if this is one reason why the crowds followed Jesus into his withdrawal. Because the story notes that they did this when they had themselves heard word about John's death. It says, right where we began reading today, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns." Which has me wonder if the crowd was less simply looking to keep company with Jesus and was moreover looking to see what Jesus would *do*. What would he *do* about it all? What would he do about the fact that the world is so monstrous, is so unjust!

Of course, some probably came out of concern for Jesus. (How would this loss affect him? Would he be heartbroken? Frightened? Swayed from his task? Enraged?) And some were maybe moved by anxiety—for themselves and for all Judea. (What would this mean for them?) And some maybe didn't know the backstory of it all, and so were shocked about it all. (What? John? Why John?) And some were maybe resigned. (Of course, Herod killed him. That's what Herods do.) Some probably seethed with resentment. (This would be the last straw after so many straws had piled up, counting back through time immemorial, the recitation of which some could do on demand. We're keeping count; we're always keeping count.) And some might have been open to vengeance, seeking Jesus in his withdrawal wondering if that was on his mind too. (That now they'd get what was coming to them—those in charge, those elites. Who were they when up against this worked up crowd thousands of people strong?)

Here they came, thousands of people with thousands of reasons, following him on foot from the towns, invading his retreat with their agitation, their yearning, their naked need, their barely disguised rage, his boat facing a rising tide of a less watery sort. The lake he was on was small, but it was big enough so he could have gotten away. Would he set his sail to away?

No. Of course, no. He had compassion for them. He came ashore, he moved among them, and cured their sick.

Then evening began to fall and people grew hungry—and not just emotionally hungry, but physically hungry, that dangerous sort of hungry, that messes with your mind even more than your already heightened feelings have already messed you up.

The disciples noticed all this. That's what I think. They noticed this, so when they went to Jesus and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves," they did so not simply for pragmatic reasons. It wasn't just the plain fact that they had no apparent means for appeasing the growing hunger. It was also the increasing risk of allowing the crowd to stay too long under these circumstances, night falling, darkness deepening, an imperial shadow that everyone now knew was growing itself evermore ravenous. The disciples weren't simply being practical, they were also being cautious in the face of real and growing danger. Somebody could get hurt out here, and someone else could do the hurting, which could create a whole dynamic, a downward spiral into chaos. You know, chaos is always a risk when you're in a deserted place. The formlessness, the un-civility of it: these are breeding grounds for real damage.

But, you know...

They also amount to an opportunity. When things have degraded to this degree, when civilization is out of reach and the law is not only slack but absent altogether, these amount to a real opportunity for someone to take charge, for a strong man to come in and take control. And people in this state are easily brought under that control, made slaves almost, totally devoted to the one in charge. All that one in charge needs to do is give the crowd something to eat. Then you can get them to do your bidding, give them somewhere to direct their energy, some "other" on which to work out their frustration, fear, and rage.

I can think of someone this crowd could be unified around and mobilized against. Can you? How far away could his palace have been? A day's journey? Maybe two?

Were the disciples worried about what Jesus might do? Were they deeply wondering, "What will he say?"

Mark's gospel makes the potential for vengeance clearer than Matthew's. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is remembered to have sat the crowd down in groups of hundreds and of fifties, which is exactly how a commander would muster troops for an attack. Gather them in battalions, companies, platoons, and then give them their orders and send them forth. Were the disciples worried? Jesus had seemed pretty upset about the murder of John. Jesus had been close with John, right? Isn't that right? He'd defended him that one time, when people were upset that John was such a drag, rough of dress, rough of speech, no fun really. But Jesus defended him: "What did you go into the wilderness after John looking for? A reed shaken by the wind? John is John. Deal with it." So, his death: this might be quite a devastation, and it might come with attending temptation, because now he had this army of fellows in grievance and all he'd have to do is feed them and they'd be his, maybe even literally eating out of the palm of his hand.

Risk all around. A hungry crowd can turn on itself or can be turned against an "other," some common enemy. So, really, please, Jesus, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

Why do we assume The Temptation in the Wilderness is the only time Jesus was tempted in the wilderness? That epic showdown when Jesus was driven by the spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil: why do we assume this only happened once, and early on in his ministry when Jesus emerged intact, triumphant; really, emerged as the Christ. In Luke's gospel, it says the tempter retreated and waited for an opportune time to try again. Maybe this struck as an opportune time.

So, no, the disciples wouldn't stand idly by. "Send the crowds away that they may buy food for themselves." As if, "Remember, Jesus: don't turn those stones to bread..." for in doing so you'll turn your people into your slaves instead of true people, truly human, living lives that are full and rich and free for their having freely chosen the love of God which is freely offered to be freely received. "Send the crowds away. They'll find food for themselves. You've done enough here."

What would he say?

This is what he said, "You give them something to eat."

It wouldn't be him. It would be them. It wouldn't be *him* to do it, for that would be too much power in this one moment for him to have. It would *them*.

And that they did is generally the thing we marvel at. That the disciples were able to feed this crowd of hungry thousands, and of only five loaves of bread and two fish, is generally the thing thought marvelous, incredible.

And I suppose that's right. It is marvelous. It *does* strain credulity. It does take faith to imagine it.

But it's also typical of Jesus. He's the manifestation of God in the world, after all. He's the thing by which the Lord God is made most concentrated amidst God's creation. So why not that his presence could make possible the impossible, make sufficient things that seem so *insufficient*? If we accept him as the Christ, the one whose way is salvation for all the world, then why not accept his ability to do this—five loaves of bread and two fish?

So, maybe this is what's just as amazing, that Jesus faced choices already set before him, that he send the crowd away so they could see to their own needs, or that he finally surrender to the temptation that first came to him back when this whole thing began which would make captive the crowd, captives in his very own personality cult, and then maybe mobilized against everything that's wrong with the world, instead what Jesus did was form the church. This command is to us: "You give the something to eat."

I've had several funerals to officiate this summer, in both Monterey and Lenox. The scripture passages people tend to choose for funerals are ones of urgent hope, which tend to be ones that come to us from times of dire need.

But that's true of most of our sacred texts. Most of the Bible comes to us from times when everything, *everything* had come apart. Civilization had collapsed. Law had broken down. Food was scarce. Safety was nowhere to be found. All that remained was the Word, that primordial, creative Word. And one of the things it called forth to be was the Church, a gathering of people who answer to a call that is irrespective of other sorts of orderliness, who gather to a call of self-giving love in service of the other.

And I've been struck lately as I prepare for these funerals, as I prepare to preach for people who aren't necessarily of the church, who don't know our ways or convictions, or who know them only from the outside and from the loudest, showiest versions of church: I've been struck by how inadequate to the task the church is as an answer to the troubling ways, and moreover the tragic woes, of this lovely, terrible world. There's so much we *can't* do to make all this right. It's almost embarrassing that we even hope to be of much help, which I guess I feel most consciously when outsiders stop in for some formal occasion. "Welcome to our shabby home, which provides some sanctuary from the glittering, aggressive, dangerous, gorgeous world. Would you like a little square of bread?"

But I've more lately been thinking that inadequacy is exactly what's called for here. It's when we've got a lot of power that we become more dangerous than promising. You know, ambition is only recently praised as a virtue. Until not long ago, ambition was a vice, something to be tempered rather than, these days, something to be cultivated and then set loose. When I tell my kids this, they can hardly believe it. Their world is one of overweening ambition, their mostly mediocrity amidst it all a source of shame.

But we are most of us mostly mediocre. What's wrong with that? Nothing's wrong with that.

"You give them something to eat" is a recipe for good enough. Being the church and walking with people through days difficult and days joyous, through times of hunger and times of fulfillment, through victories and humiliations: this is a blessed way to be in a world that tempts to change it, though which we do at our own peril, and with a God who invites us be who we are and reach out to others as they are and share a meal that isn't all that impressive but which therein lies the blessing.

This is for the living of our days. May they be many, and may they be good enough.

Thanks be to God.