6th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 2.13.22

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26
He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (633)

The people were gathered from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon. This is to say it was a mixed crowd—a mixture of Jews, these from Judea and Jerusalem, and Gentiles, these from Tyre and Sidon. The Jews would likely have seen in Jesus' descent from the mountain to a level place an echo of Moses. His ages' ago descent from Mount Sinai, a repeated thing but initially so grand a thing, him with the Ten Commandments, the beginning of the Law: it would find an echo here with Jesus coming down "with them."

What, I wondered, would the Gentiles have seen?

It all began, though, with me wondering why Luke remembers this sermon as on the plain in the first place. Matthew remembers Jesus to have preached on a mount, hence the Sermon on the Mount, which just makes sense. An elevated place makes the speaker more easily heard.

He also remembers it being longer, and it involving no "woe." In Matthew, we get the Beatitudes, nine of them, but no "woe"—which, the longer I thought about it, surprised me.

Matthew, otherwise, reads as so angry, yet he remembers Jesus as full of beatitude, with hardly a woe.

In Luke, we get Blessings and Woes, four of each, blessing for those currently suffering something woeful, and woe for those now enjoying abundant blessing—this though Luke is usually felt as conciliatory. Especially in recent scholarship, which is to say in recent centuries, Luke has been taken as conciliatory for the most part, no real argument with the Pharisees, as we see in Matthew, no real argument with the empire, as we see in Mark, no real argument with "the Jews" as we see in John, unhelpfully so when you read it out of its original context. Luke, the only Gentile writer of all the books in the Bible, seems to get along with everyone, even the disciples who aren't nearly as doltish as they are in other renderings of this story.

There is, however, coming a great reversal. "The great reversal," it's come to be called, Luke's central premise. It's coming, this thing which we see in Luke time and again—the Lord throwing the mighty off their thrones and lifting up the lowly.

Mary first spoke of it, you'll remember, in her song following the angel Gabriel coming to her to announce her conceiving by the Holy Spirit. So she first sang, celebrating the Lord as filling the hungry with good things but sending the rich away empty.

It goes on from there, over and again.

There is coming a great reversal.

This would have been good news to the Jews, I imagine, most of them anyway. On the whole, they *suffered* the Roman occupation of their land, just as they'd suffered the Greek occupation before that, and the Persian before that, and the Babylonian before that, and the Assyrian before that. A few rose in rank, like Herod and Herod's sons. These would have had the dubious privilege of shuttling back and forth between the Jewish people and their overlords. They were known to be cynical by each and all, survivors, exploiters to make a bad situation good at least for them. But most Jews just lived as if with a boot on their neck.

A great reversal, then: yes, please.

How, I wondered though, would this news have landed with regular old Romans, regular Gentiles?

This is the question, a question that came up a lot in the fall while we read through Luke's other book, his sequel as it were, the book of Acts. Why was everyone so fired up about this new revelation? What about this had people so stirred up, whether happily so that they might join up with this new movement, the church, or punitively so, that they might put these annoying

preachers in prison, that they might eventually stone a few to death, or crucify them? What was the big deal?

It's only hardly answered. We know very little about regular old Romans and the Gentiles that weren't even that, were people living within the empire's bounds but not even proper citizens. Most of what we know of antiquity comes from stories of the great ones—emperors, kings, commanders in battle, gods and demigods. The acts of such as these were noted, are now known, from, among other things, a classical literary genre called Acts—which, incidentally, makes the biblical book Acts ironic, sort of a joke, because the apostles weren't the type to get a book of Acts. They were far too ordinary for such an honorific, because, when it came to the normals, it's as if they didn't exist. In fact, after some searching, I finally found but one book on it, which I've ordered but haven't received yet. *Invisible Romans:* it's praised in the online comments for its painstaking unearthing of things previously unknown and hardly even asked—because, really, who cares? The classical world certainly didn't.

One thing we do know, though: the Graeco-Roman gods were up there on high, doing what they did, romping, raving, raping, bickering, playing tricks. Classicist Marianne Bonz writes about them. "Assembled on Mt. Olympus, the [Graeco-Roman] gods formed a kind of extended family…an exclusive society, with its own laws and hierarchy. First came the twelve great gods and goddesses… [with Zeus] as the first among equals, ruling over this frequently contentious and somewhat dysfunctional Olympian family."

She continues, "These gods were thought of as resembling people, except they were much bigger, more powerful, and usually more beautiful. Like mortals, they experienced emotions, such as love, hate, anger, and jealousy. But unlike mortals, their bodies always healed from the wounds of war or the ravages of disease, and they never aged. The gods also possessed the ability to change themselves into all manner of disguises, including those of animals and inanimate objects."

"For all of their majesty and beauty, however," she concludes, "the Olympian deities seemed not to care about the lives of ordinary human beings. And by the arrival of the common era, [which is to say the time when Jesus lived, the time when the church had begun to take form and the books of the New Testament were being composed] these gods had become largely ceremonial. The devotion of the average Greek or Roman centered on gods of lesser rank, gods who had once been mortal and who, therefore, understood the sufferings of mortals, [which is to say] gods who cared."

The people, it seems, wanted gods who cared.

Funny thing, just before Jesus descended this mountain, he'd ascended it to pray and, while up there, from among the many disciples who'd come to follow him and to learn from him, he called the twelve apostles, these whom he'd send out in his name. They were Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. These twelve, all up there together, came down with Jesus and stood on a level place.

If to Jews Jesus was here as a new Moses, maybe to Gentles he was here as a new Zeus and these twelve were as Poseidon, Hephaestus, Hermes, Ares, Apollo, Hera, Athene, Artemis, Hestia, Aphrodite, Demeter, Dionysus.

If so, I can only imagine the apostles suffered by comparison. Like, if you show up at a party wearing the same thing Kate Moss is wearing and the next day you're in *People Magazine*: "Who wore it best?"

Do we really need to ask?

These apostles weren't bigger, weren't more powerful, weren't more beautiful than mere mortals. They weren't super-powered in battle or quick to heal, and they certainly weren't immortal. Though they had their own book of Acts, that's not to say they *deserved* it for they, like their leader, would indeed die, he to die in pain and shame by the worst means ever contrived.

Which was, perhaps, very much the point.

Maybe now the world was ready for far less godly gods. Maybe now was the time for a god who resembles the human.

It's not for nothing that more often than Jesus was called Son of God he was called Son of Man. The emperor though: he really needed to be considered Son of God.

You know, sometimes when someone finds out I'm a pastor, there comes a proclamation, "Well, I don't believe in God." Sometimes it seems meant to shock; it doesn't shock. Other times it seems its meant as defiant; I don't mind that I'm not authoritative to everyone everywhere. Sometimes it seems more sorrowing than anything, like someone for whom the world as made narrative no longer holds, perhaps because the narrative is no longer true and maybe never was. But mostly it just seems like a willful stopping up of the imagination. On the couple of occasions there's seemed an opening, I've said in response, "Tell me about the god you don't believe in because chances are good I don't believe in that god either."

It matters what god or gods we believe in, even if our belief comes as rejection. It matters how we imagine the world we inhabit and what lies beyond it and what doesn't, what is supernatural and enduring and what was once imagined so but is no longer plausible, no longer holds the human mind and experience. It matters as it comes to inform how we live, what we build of this world and how we think of ourselves and of our neighbors not to mention the strangers whom we'll never meet or know.

The Graeco-Roman world had it that what glory you managed to reach in life you would bring into eternity, and what shame you suffered in life would follow you as well—which, incidentally, I'd bet was a selling point for gladiators of the arena, many of whom volunteered to be. Though they rarely lived past the age of thirty, though most wouldn't live past their first time in the arena, they might at least die in glory, which, slaves or low-born or otherwise useless, was the only way they had any hope for glory, glory now which would mean glory amidst the gods. It's as if the eternal realm were but a magnified version of the here and now.

Jesus according to Luke had an altogether different vision of the reign of God, not a magnification but a reversal, as if a correction, if not yet quite imagined a full redemption. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven…" But woe to those who think what glory they wrestle and win amidst this land of the living will follow them into a glorious hereafter. Zeus might have been impressed by your cleverness, but the Suffering Lord means salvation as something far more mysterious and more redeeming.

A century and a half earlier than Luke's syncretism of the Greek world and the Jewish Lord came a book, Hebrew in tradition, Greek in composition. Ecclesiasticus: it pivots on this point of Greek notions of glory and shame and Hebraic convictions that love comes to play here: "Let us now sing the praises of famous men," comes its most famous verse.

"Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning. There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction; those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with

resources, living peacefully in their homes—all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise.

"But of others," continues the song, "there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.

"But these also were godly men…" a most woeful protestation of the way things are, or at least the way they seem to be.

I've officiated at funerals, one I remember in particular, where, if I were both brave and honest, I'd have offered this as the reading from scripture. "It's not fair," would have been my eulogy. "This whole thing, this whole painful life that in this case, abused, lonely, humiliated, and now finished: it isn't fair."

But to believe this at all, that it isn't *fair*, is to have been touched by the gospel. To believe this, that this one person didn't deserve any that he got, and that that person over there never stood a chance, and that all those people who get harangued to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps though they have no boots so maybe those already up should give them a hand, and that everyone who believes their best hope is to die young and fast deserves to imagine past this close horizon: this is all to have been touched by the gospel. These people, each one of them, every single one: they deserve more. They deserve life and love and even honor and praise. If anyone does deserve such things, then everyone does. This is to have been touched by the gospel.

And it's this, by the way, that Nietzsche hated about Christianity. Frederick Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher of nihilism, hated the gospel for its creating a bunch of baby-men, a bunch of snowflakes, for its honoring weaklings and shaming the strong.

And it's this, by the way, that made Hitler and other fascists love Nietzsche, for his giving them permission to be brutal in the name of beauty and power and glory like in the good old days.

Truly, to say no to all this cheap glory is to have been touched by the gospel, the gospel especially according to Luke, for it's he who seems more than the other three to have given us the human as much as he gave us Jesus Christ.

There perhaps once was a time when lots of people had no reason to think of themselves as blessed or worthy of blessing or held in any regard at all.

This, of course, hobbles the imagination. This cripples the soul and sense of self. An ignored baby will stop crying, might eventually even lose the capacity to cry for to do so is to object

on one's own behalf. Why bother? How even to imagine the purpose for such an action, such an expenditure of energy, when you but hardly have a soul, when you as a matter practice are not?

A world full of such unloved souls. Silent, for who were they to protest, to cry out? It's just as likely that rocks would cry out for being stepped on.

And then, come down to a level place, Jesus speaks, love itself, imagining a great reversal, evoking a great reversal, in speaking it making it so.

We worried about it. At Bible study this week, we worried about it—these blessings and their corresponding woes. It seems vengeful, we shook our heads. It seems like the same old brutality just playing out in a new way, a new cohort of people to suffer the same old punishments. But I wonder if that's to hear it too literally. Not meaning to escape what woe is due me, rich as I am, blessed as I am in this life, I wonder if by this whole sermon Jesus meant more to evoke than to predict, meant more to interrupt the long settled way of thinking with something altogether new.

Watch how the people respond to it, and trust that it is good. Watch the crowds gather, watch the disciples abandon their nets. Watch the apostles not shut up their own imagining even under the threat of death. Watch the taking down of arenas with their bloodspot and the building up of hospitals and schools with their humanism. Watch the ordinary become recognized as wondrous works of God.

This is the tradition we uphold in our hearing. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Thanks be to God.