

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.16.20

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed...And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.⁸ Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (485)

Sometimes, on very rainy days, when I open the back door to let the dogs out, they'll poke their noses out and notice the rain. They'll often back away from that situation, especially the little one, Daisy. When, moments later, they beg at the front door to go out, I'll tell them, "It's raining in the front yard, too." But they don't listen. I open the door, they poke their noses out, and back away.

I open the doors a lot in my household.

I was in mind of this lately when I had the urge to get away from the pandemic. I just wanted a break. I just wanted to get out from under the heavy cloud of it. I could go to a retreat house in Boston that I like. (Forget that it's not open to guests.) Or, we as a family could go to the Adirondacks or Lake Winnepesaukee. We had fun there once in a little rental cabin—bumper cars, arcade games. (Forget that all this, too, is closed.) I wanted to be in a place of spontaneity and free interactions and surprising delights, the sort of thing you get on vacation because you don't know anyone so everyone is probably someone you'd like, and you're not from there so you don't have opinions about anything controversial or complicated.

Apparently, I'm not the only one having this flight of fancy, the only flight available now. A podcast I listen to always has three segments about current events and a fourth segment about something other than current events. Lately, the three people of the panel have been taking suggestions from their audience via Twitter about what they should talk about during their "plus" segment. Friday's topic was what each panelist would do if there were a 24-hour break from the pandemic.

Their answers were less memorable to me than the question.

A break from it all.

Remember when we thought this could go on for a month, and that felt unimaginably long? Five months later now... No end in sight...

Tyre was a place far away—Tyre and Sidon. The city and region where Jesus has now gone, Tyre and Sidon were further away from Galilee than anywhere else he went according to the gospel narratives. Thirty miles to Tyre, fifty miles to Sidon, he had to have gone to real effort to be there.

What's more, Tyre is a city surrounded on all sides by the sea. It was, in Jesus' time, connected to land only by a causeway that Alexander the Great had built in the 4th century before Christ. An aerial map makes it look like a thought-balloon in a comic book, as if the mainland of Syria were but imagining it.

The people there were Syrophenician, which is to say Gentiles, and likely wealthy ones at that. They were wealthier at least than anyone from Gennesaret, which is to say Galilee, the region where Jesus had just come from. But Syrophenicians weren't all that upsetting a people to the Jews in general, and vice versa. There was a time when these people, then called Canaanites, would

have been felt as a threat—as when Ahab married Jezebel, which we heard about last week. But that time was long past. A millennium on now, there had come a peaceful coexistence.

For all this, there's little mention of this city and region in the New Testament. When it is mentioned, it's referenced as a place of "woe" as opposed to blessing. But even that feels more emblematic than actual.

This is to say that Tyre was, for all Jesus' purposes, inconsequential. There was no apparent reason for Jesus to make this trip, this very long trip—except to get away.

To get away! It's something Jesus has been trying to do for several weeks now, according to our following the gospel narrative liturgically. It's around the end of July when it happens, the catalytic event that has Jesus in a distressed state. Prior to that, he's remembered to have taught in parables, and we hear in church many of those parables throughout July. Following that, throughout August, we see him trying to get away, to an isolated place, to a deserted place to pray, and this week to Tyre. The catalyst itself, though, is something we don't hear, not liturgically, which drives me nuts. I don't understand why, during the year we follow the Gospel of Matthew, which is to say Year A, which is to say this year, we skip right over what happened to make Jesus pivot from speaking in parables to ever-growing crowds to him trying over and over to get away.

John's death. John's *murder*.

John the baptizer was Jesus' cousin, about six months older. He was also Jesus' herald, the one sent to go ahead of him as the Messiah to prepare a way from him. John was killed, beheaded at a dinner party that Herod was hosting, a banality that we're right to find horrifying.

Once the head had made its appearance at the dinner party, John's disciples came to retrieve the body to prepare it for burial.

Then they went to tell Jesus what had happened.

And then Jesus is remembered to have gone out to a deserted place to pray.

See, because the one who was to go ahead of him was now dead, which makes it so suddenly he was out front alone.

But great crowds came and found him, they too perhaps distressed by what had happened to John, and by what it indicated about the state of mind of their king. In a murdering mood, Herod was perhaps newly felt as a menace. In a vulnerable state, the people of this kingdom were perhaps newly feeling themselves at risk, in strange if inarticulate need.

This would have Jesus expressing his care for the crowd in healing the sick among them, and then providing supper for them, with the help of the disciples, though in a deserted place and among a crowd of about 10,000 people, maybe more, all of five loaves and two fish.

Following that, in a story we heard last week, Jesus is remembered to have sent the disciples on ahead in a boat across the lake while he stayed behind and dismissed the crowd and spent the night in prayer. He did this, though he could see from his place that the disciples were foundering in their boat, which was now amidst a storm on the lake.

See, because Jesus shouldn't have sent the disciples on ahead while he stayed behind. And later on, we'll see that he eventually learned his proper place—that is to go ahead rather than to stay behind. When he'd begun at last to teach his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you," which had Jesus rebuke Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And maybe the thing about this encounter that jumps out at us is the sting of Jesus calling Peter "Satan." What's as important, though, is Jesus asserting that the right and only place for him in regard to the disciples is out front, going ahead.

For him to hide among the ranks is to have set his mind on human things—that he doesn't *want* to be out front in a world so messed up that it got the one who had been out front of him now beheaded, that he doesn't *want* to be similarly killed, that he doesn't *want* to be as the drummer boy heading unarmed into battle, the first one shot, the easiest one killed.

For him to stay behind while he sends his friends go on ahead—into a world of storms, into a world murderous kings and their lecherous courtiers, into a world of hunger and helplessness and sickness and need, of pandemics and racial injustice and global warming and nuclear proliferation; for him to stay behind while the rest go on ahead is to do the devil's work, quite literally, because, remember? Back in the wilderness? Back when Jesus was first tempted and tested as to whether he had it in him to serve as the Christ? All those temptations were essentially this: "Save your own skin. To hell with everyone else. With all this newfound power, you could really exalt yourself and capture the people into slavish devotion. Give them all bread; and watch them beg for it. Give them a good show; and watch them fall in line. Take under your rule all the

kingdoms of the world; and have a good old time. The whole world, your coliseum; all the people, your gladiators or slaves, ripping and shredding, while you watch from above, amused. Ha-ha.”

Now?

Well, we’re past those earliest, and most grotesque, temptations. Those obvious ones were apparently easy to resist. That face-to-face with the devil himself was, it would seem, quite easy to withstand.

Now, though?

We’re yet among subtler temptations—now that there was literally no one to go out in front of him, now that John his herald had himself lost his head and so could no longer be out ahead, now that this growing body of disciples had a new head in Jesus, and a true head in Jesus. Now, with temptation not as supernatural, now bluntly natural—a stupidly murdered and deeply missed cousin; a need for some time alone to come to terms with it all, but an equally needful crowd, all these lost sheep of Israel; and at last an escape to a thought-balloon of a city, an almost-fantastical place where nothing would be real or pressing, no one would know or recognize him, and he would bear no responsibility for anything or anyone in this place apart: how would he do now?

Because he was, after all, sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, right?

Right?

This Canaanite woman wasn’t his problem, right?

Right?

So why was she yelling after him? How even did she recognize him? And who was her daughter to him? No one!

It’s ironic perhaps that Matthew, as Mark before him, remembers Jesus to have preached about what actually defiles a man right before Jesus demonstrates such a thing. It’s ironic perhaps because Jesus has made a legal point here, arguing that what holiness actually concerns is less what you eat or drink, less what company you keep at table or whether you’ve ritually cleaned your hands, and more what you think or feel about others, how you behave in their regard, how you imagine and understand them as to their being similarly created and beloved as you. In sum, according to Jesus, worry less about what you eat and drink, and more about how you speak and act, because God is less concerned with whether you pluck grain on the Sabbath and more about whether you slander someone else.

You know, sometimes you preach the sermon you yourself need to hear, and sometimes you don't even realize you're doing it.

With this sermon of Jesus still hanging in the air, he retreated to that thought balloon of a place, where he implied that this woman, so desperately in need, is a dog. Talk about slander. She had no rightful claim on what Jesus had come to do, what Jesus had been empowered to enact in the world. The restoration she sought for her desperately ill daughter was something she had no right to ask for from Jesus, which he let her know in terms none could defend, though many a preacher has tried. He let her know, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

And that's right, right?

There has always been a steady drumbeat of expansion when it comes to this God. There has always been a gentle but forceful pushing out, pushing out of the outer boundary of who in God gets folded in. The creation stories of the Bible are themselves wildly cosmic, defiant of tribal identity. The earliest stories of the patriarchs are also stories of crossing outer boundaries to go still further out. Even the first most focused concern of this God for a particular people, when God chose the slaves of Egypt as His beloved, they weren't an already formed tribe of people, but were a class of people—and an *underclass* at that, the slaves of Egypt. These were the beloved of God not for some tribal bloodline but for some commonly held social station, which was one bearing the brunt of injustice and exploitation, a grab-bag of humanity. Then came the prophets, who themselves were less concerned with propriety and more concerned with justice, as in Isaiah who a half a millennium before Jesus' fateful trip to a place beyond received a word from the Lord about pushing beyond the boundaries of the people Israel: "I will gather others to them...foreigners who join themselves in my salvation, my deliverance..."

It's as if this had always been the aim—to keep pushing beyond, to keep moving past what boundary had been established as "this far and no farther" in order to gather in still more of this wild and abounding creation.

This, the Lord said through the prophet during the time of return. After years in exile, now the people could return to their land and restore their way of life. They would reestablish themselves as a people of justice, of doing what is right as regards neighbor and even stranger. And this would become an appeal unto itself. It would appeal to those not yet of the houses of Israel and Judah, appeal to many others even, to join up and come in, to live and serve in love, to aspire

to holiness and keeping the covenant. And they should be welcomed in, all these foreigners and strangers now come to make of this remnant people (so few left) once again a whole cloth.

This expansive Lord and expanding people of an ever-widening beloved community had long been in the works.

It does, though, seem to have come as news to Jesus—that he was not, in fact, sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that he was in truth sent to the whole world, this whole sad and sorry world where to love is to suffer, to see is to grieve, but to grieve is then to hope.

To me, the most exhausting thing about this pandemic isn't the worry it causes me, or the household stresses it's pressed upon me, but the imagining and re-imagining it demands of me and us all. This virus, COVID, attacks at the root of so many of our assumptions and settled matters—our social lives and interpersonal responsibilities, our political lives and understanding of self and society, our economic lives and discerning what things are fundamental to the up-building of vitality and dynamism. The demands of imagination, which this virus presses upon us all, overwhelm me sometimes.

That said, I think this, our religious practice, has made me and the likes of us unusually fit for these demands. Worship, after all, is at its heart an exercise of the imagination. Prayer is an imagining of yourself or of another in the light of God, a holding in mind some person or people or circumstance, to play with it, to wonder about, to envision anew, which is to join one's mind with the mind of God.

You know, another word for this whole project of faithful imagining is repentance, *metanoia*, a change of heart or of mindset, an opening of the imagination to approach God's wide and wild imagining as regards the creation, God's all-knowing mind and all-loving heart now admitted into our far more limited minds and narrower hearts.

We probably hear "repentance" as about an admission of another sort—to admit something secret or shameful about yourself. But there's a greater admission that happens in repentance as well—an admission of God's wisdom, a letting in of God's knowing and loving, an allowing in God's compassion and mercy.

Watching our savior in real time reimagine his place in the world might unnerve us for a moment. It might also have unnerved Jesus. Seeing Jesus himself undergo such a process of repentance might have us rather turning away. Jesus slandering this woman is not a good look.

Might it also, though, strengthen us for the grand project that lies before us—reimagining everything as nothing is anymore a given, reimagining this whole world now gathered under the pall of pandemic yet again soon to rise to new ways of being. Perhaps this morning Jesus has gone ahead of us in an act of repentance such that he is once again our best hope.

I'll admit this week I spent a lot time looking for the doorway that doesn't lead out into this storm. But every doorway does. I take heart in knowing that already headed out into this storm is Jesus. He couldn't get away because there was no away to which he could go. All he could do, then, was to love and to gather in.

This is the way in which we should follow.

Thanks be to God.