

8th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.18.21

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)

In 1934, a young woman named Sara Pollard applied to Vassar College. In those days, parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and Sara's father described her, truthfully, as "more a follower type than a leader." The school accepted Sara, explaining that it had enough leaders.

That was probably the last time an elite school accepted someone for this quality. That was probably the last time a parent said any such thing about his or her child out loud. Now, you wouldn't even whisper such a thing.

This is how Susan Cain began an op-ed she wrote for the *New York Times* four years ago. About a new discipline in organizational psychology, Cain wrote of "followership." It has yet to take off in popularity. At the time of her writing, schools like Harvard and Yale were, according to their websites, eager to accept those who would be "citizen-leaders" or the "leaders of their

generation,” and I’d be willing to bet the same is true now, though I haven’t checked. Princeton, for its part, was on the lookout for applicants who’ve taken on “leadership activities” in the years prior to their applying, and I’d be willing to bet the same is true now. None suggest they’re looking for people who follow, not even who follow wisely, with care and commitment. That’s something of a lost art—or would be if it were ever considered an art in the first place.

And this is a narrow survey, I’ll grant you. The application recommendations for Ivy Leagues schools hardly tell us everything we need to know about our society and its values. But they tell us something.

Who here would eagerly admit to being a “follower type”?

The thing is, it’s a prominent theme in the Bible that people need to follow at least as much as they’re needed to lead. Actually, there’s hardly a proportional comparison. Few people in the Bible come to lead; most people are imagined as seeking to follow. It’s as if in the scriptural imagination, one essential quality of people is that they follow, and that they therefore need someone to follow—that *we* need someone to follow. Indeed, we seek it out, whether consciously or not—though given our collective disdain for the “follower type,” it’s likely we do it unconsciously.

What a blessing, then, when given someone *worthy* to follow.

When the people of God were suffering as slaves in Egypt, God called on Moses to lead them out, and by this the people became free from exploitation—and this came as blessing.

When the people of God strove to be like other nations and clamored for a king (though the Lord their God was to be their king), God urged the prophet Samuel to anoint for the people a king—and then, when the kings had begun to degrade, as we hear in the prophecy of Jeremiah, the Lord and his prophet were angry for the people. They needed good kings, but here had risen belligerent ones. They needed kings who gathered and guided but here had risen ones who scattered and destroyed. See, the fault didn’t lie with the people who sought to follow, the fault lay with the kings who proved unworthy of their following.

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.

Compassion: the Greek word 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. Sacrificial love, then, self-giving love: it comes from the gut, and it’s translated here compassion, com-passio, suffering with.

The people were stirred up.

Jesus had been all over the region. He had been on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, then on the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, then back to the Jewish side. Then he went south to Nazareth, and then all around, and not just himself but those whom he sent out, the apostles, having given them authority over unclean spirits and healing power. And they went so far and did so much that even Herod heard of it, in faraway Jerusalem.

And he, Herod, became even more afraid because people were saying this new teacher was as if John the Baptizer had been raised from the dead. And he (John the Baptizer) had been disturbing enough to Herod when he was alive, so much so that Herod kept him in prison. But then he killed him, beheaded him because Herod's wife and her daughter told him to do so when he'd said he'd give them anything they wished and they wished for John's head on a platter, so what could he do but fulfill their wish? And now he was back? John the Baptizer was back? Or so it seemed? Which had Herod in fear, and a frightened Herod was a frightening Herod—another belligerent king.

The people were stirred up.

But their frightening king was an almost secondary concern because more frightening, it seems, was Jesus—who he was, what he was doing, the effect he was having wherever he went. Over and over again, especially in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has such effect as making those closest to him afraid. Over and over again, according to Mark, “they were afraid.” We see this most distressingly in Mark’s rendering of the resurrection—Easter morning, the tomb empty of Jesus’ body though a man there telling the women to get the others on to Galilee for there Jesus would meet them. This, according to Mark, had the women running away and saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

And why shouldn’t they be? This was terrifying. The world wasn’t as they’d thought. Nothing was as they’d thought. If dead people don’t stay dead, then what did any of this mean?

But this happens all over Mark’s gospel, not just as its final note, Jesus making the people closest to him afraid.

It’s likely not what we think should be the case when it comes to Jesus, meek and mild, friend so kind and gentle.

On the other hand, Jesus made present the reign of God, which could only make the kingdoms and nations of this world roil in tumult. In Jesus was present the urgency of God, whose coming would disrupt everything. He was as a thief in the night come to loot the whole household of this world, come to bind the strongmen now in charge of the world so to take back the stuff

that never really belonged to them in the first place. And binding a strongman provokes strongmen to fight back, which makes it so we'd likely prefer just to leave to well enough alone.

But with Jesus there *was* no leaving well enough alone. He wouldn't stop making manifest the reign of God because he *couldn't* stop making manifest the reign of God. Like when we step into the sunlight and cast a shadow, we couldn't stop casting a shadow even if we really wanted to. So with Jesus casting the presence of God. His effect was his effect whether he was trying for it or not.

Healing.

Restoring.

Upending what's deemed good in the world, what's at least deemed good enough in the world.

Walking on water.

Ordering a storm to stop—and it did.

Death, his own death, undone—and it was frightening. According to Mark, much of what he did left those around him frightened—because there was no letting well enough alone with him, there was no letting sleeping dogs lie with him, there was no *not* poking that bear or swatting that's hornet's nest. None of the clichés that help us resign ourselves to a world where so much is wrong (but what can we do about it?); none of those cliches are apt here. So, the people were stirred up, coming and going, hurried and rushed, so much so that the apostles couldn't even find leisure to eat.

Mark's gospel, of course, is one always on the move. Mark's Jesus is remembered as always on the move. From the moment he appeared on the scene, he went out to the River Jordan to be baptized, he went out to the wilderness where he'd be tempted by the tempter, he went into villages and towns, went out across the sea and again across to the other side.

Now, though, it was the crowd that was on the move—and when it's the people who are on the move, unrest becomes all the more unrestful. This is always one aspect of the great risk at social catastrophe. Whenever a people are spurred to move, there are after-effects, after-shocks. This is one aspect of the great risk of things like climate change and pandemics, like war and famine: they get people *en masse* to move, and this always comes with after-effects hard to foresee, hard to manage.

For this, Jesus intended the apostles to come away to a deserted place by themselves. The coming and going of the crowd, the hurrying and rushing, had them seeking retreat.

But they never even managed that because, while they went away on the boat, many recognized them and where they were going, and they hurried to get there ahead of them.

Fame. So much for the so-called messianic secret. So much for Jesus saying over and over again to everyone he ever healed or restored, “Don’t tell anyone about this.” Now word of him went out everywhere and he’d achieved fame, something it seems he’d intended to avoid.

Apparently, the desire for fame is more abounding now than ever. More young people claim to wish for fame more than for the other great glories—wealth, beauty, talent, intelligence. Ask anyone who’s actually famous, though, whether their lives are better now than before, and I think most would say an unequivocal no. The press of the crowd, the constancy of the crowd, the always being watched and seen and noticed and chased: it seems to make fewer happy than angry, resentful, abusive of those who follow as fans, or self-destructive as if they just want to get out of it.

Rarely does it make anyone compassionate—which is no sleight against any of them, just to point out one more way Jesus is singular in the world. At their desperate need, at their fear and fury, rushing and hurrying, he was stirred in sacrificial love. Sheep without a shepherd.

Until now.

He would teach them. Then he would feed them—five thousand men, plus women and children of five loaves of bread and two fish, a story we won’t hear, not today anyway.

And I’ve always wondered what it was that he taught them. Whenever I’ve considered this text for this Sunday, it’s had me wonder what he taught them, it’s had me think it’s funny, and a little frustrating, that we’re made not to know. Today, though, it seems enough to consider *that* he taught them—for to teach is to show respect, to assume some power on *their* part. In Jesus teaching these people who bore some resemblance to sheep, it’s clear they were also, in Jesus’ mind, very much not sheep—and this is what made Jesus so worthy a shepherd, that he sought not subordination but participation, that he meant not for his own empowerment but for the empowerment of all people to take part in the reign of God come near.

Robert Kelley, a professor of management and organizational behavior, defined “followership” in a 1988 Harvard Business Review article, which Susan Cain quoted in her op-ed article from four years ago. Professor Kelley listed the qualities of a good follower. These included being committed to “a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves” and being “courageous, honest, and credible.”

These are all qualities, it seems to me, that, were they widespread among the populace, were they touted as highly valued and therefore worthy aims, we'd be better off as a society, indeed much better off.

We're terrible followers. These days, we people are terrible followers—and probably because we loathe to imagine ourselves as followers, and therefore can't think critically about this inborn fact of us. There's something shameful about that state, or so we've been told. It makes us "sheeple," when what we should all be instead marching to the beat of our drum and doing "our own research" and flying our flag, "Don't tread on me!"

We're terrible followers, and it's tragic, and contributing to it, I imagine, is elite universities loathe themselves to educate into this truth about us—that far more frequently as it will come to any of us to lead it will come to us to follow, to join up and to participate in something worthy of our devotion. Though how shall we be capable of discerning such worthiness if it's never been put to us as an honorable pursuit in the first place—the pursuit of something worthy of our devotion?

I've been a lifelong member of the church. I know well that those outside the church imagine those within its fold as surrendering something essential about ourselves in order conform—surrendering our critical thinking, surrendering our individuality, subordinating and becoming as sheep to a leadership that coerces and deceives.

That's never been how I've felt it, else I wouldn't be here.

How I've felt it is that in the church there's something worthy of my following—and this makes me much more discerning about any such other things that might come along. Being engaged seriously as someone who would follow, as Jesus does, engage me seriously, makes my following in any effort a question I'll take likewise seriously.

Being nurtured as a follower makes me a much less credulous follower.

If the same might be true about you, you can entrust your followership here, as this congregation of Christ's church makes as its aim a worthiness of your devotion, makes as its aim that you be a much less credulous follower.

The world will present with all sorts of things unworthy of your devotion. The world does present with all sorts of things unworthy of your followership, of our followership. What we learn here is to be as ballast in face of such furious unrest.

Thanks be to God.