

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.14.20

Exodus 19:2-8a

2 They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." ⁷So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."

Matthew 9:35-10:14

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." ¹Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. ⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. (519)

The world is on fire. Gorgeous day notwithstanding, the world is on fire, which I don't need to tell you; you already know. So many of the givens with which we closed out winter, embarked on spring, are all but irrelevant. These just four months later, the systems that held up our life together up are all called into question. The school year, the election year, the justice system, the supply chains by which the economy runs and by which we are clothed and fed (among

other things), the signs of the seasons (Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow), even the way we worship, though the fundamentals stretch back two thousand years (breaking bread together, singing hymns together): it's all thrown up the air, or rising like ash in the air, and we are yet to see how it all lands or reconstitutes itself. The pandemic, not to mention its many shock-effects, is as much an exercise in strenuous imagining and re-imagining as it is a demonstration of viral infection.

We're still amidst the first wave, by the way, as numbers continue to rise.

The world is on fire, and when it comes to some aspects of that burning, it might turn out to be a matter of good riddance. There was a lot about our life together that wasn't working, that only partially made for human thriving. There was a lot that wasn't good.

Still, I grieve. And I hope.

I'm on what I call smart Twitter. I follow only very smart people on the platform: journalists, academics, specialists of various sorts, theologians I admire, and some colleagues I find serious and amusing in just the right measure. Shortly into the shutdown, there was a subgenre of tweets going around. It was basically this: "Here's why my thinking was right all along." People would post articles they'd written several years ago that, had they been heeded, would have had us not in the terrible position we were in, or would at least have given us a heads up about what's possible, even likely. They were prophetic in some sense, these articles; and whenever people would post one, it was often with some mention of this being one more entry in the genre: #hereswhyiwastrightallalong. Epidemiologists, economists, social scientists, political theorists, be they libertarians or socialists or liberals or neo-liberals: here's why you all should have listened to me.

Turns out smart people can be funny, insightful, and insufferable all in one breath, or all in one tweet, as it were.

The thing is, though, clergy were having the same conversation. In the couple of groups I drop in with from time to time, we local clergy were finding our liturgies for this Sunday three years ago (Easter, Year A; Pentecost, Year A) fit the current situation we're in pretty well, or our notes on the scripture readings from the last time we were to preach on them were fitting now too. It's as if the church were established for such a time as this, as if the people of God are formed to respond in faith and hope when everything else comes apart.

The fact that the world *can* come apart: this itself might shock those who believe in the world and not much else. I remember it did me, when I was a kid. I've told you this story before, about me as a ten-year-old sifting through my dad's map collection. A fan of *National Geographic*, he had a slew of their maps, one a political map of Africa from early 20th century. Reading the name of one country aloud—Rhodesia or something—I was surprised at his response, “Huh, that doesn't even exist anymore. Guess it's an old map.” I was shocked that something as real as a whole country could come not to exist. (In the case of Rhodesia, of course: good riddance.)

So, it doesn't really shock me anymore—for that weird lesson, but also for this weird habit of mine, which you apparently share, of imagining past the world as we know it. Worship: it's all about imagining what's beyond the world as we know it, what's above the roof of the world that insists it's the highest thing there is, what's out, out beyond the structures that proclaim their sturdy realness, out to where the stars yet shine, a stunning array.

Okay. The fact that the world as we know it is limited, and, inasmuch as it is built, it can also come apart: this isn't really a shock. On the contrary, to people who believe in the God of eternity, for people who seek regular communion with the God who transcends over all, even while imminent within and among all, it's not unimaginable that there might come a time when that horizon of what lies beyond is all that's left to see—a wondering, what's next?

I don't mean to make light of the trauma of it—which, if you're like me, might well feel like trauma. Losing much of what made up my life; worse, seeing the boys lose much of what made up their lives: it's been sorrowing. Memorial Day weekend was especially so, a weird reminder of what we've lost. Jack usually has his end-of-year dance concert with Berkshire Pulse during Memorial Day weekend. Tobias marches as a drummer in the high school band for the Memorial Day parade. Next to look forward to is the moving up day for whichever of the two is moving up—5th grade to 6th, 8th grade to 9th, there's always some such. Mom visits. The cousins from Denver plan their trip east.

This year, Memorial Day weekend was about memorializing much more than usual—and it wasn't easy. Losing so much has been tough to get through while keeping spirits up.

I actually kept having an image come to me in the early days of the shutdown. It's an image from a television show I never watched, but so it goes with my imagination: it doesn't take much to make an impression. “Under the Dome” is the name of the show, and it's about a town that

comes to exist under a dome that gets dropped from the sky—this to safeguard from some contagion or ecological devastation. The dome comes down in the middle of the fields that outskirt the town and in which cows graze. One of those cows was in the wrong spot at the wrong time and it gets bisected by the drop of the dome.

Apparently, for the length of the tv show, that bisected cow can be seen in the background, stuck up against the clear glass of the dome.

I felt as if such was my life and our life together: bisected, suddenly cut off from all that lay outside our domes of quarantine. There was a visceral quality to the split, almost amputative—upsetting, even deeply unnerving, but (and here’s my point) not unthinkable. For people who imagine themselves in relation to the grand stories of our faith, for people who engage with these stories regularly, frequently, the notion that civilizations rise and fall isn’t so foreign. The notion that tribes become nations, which become empires, which then topple and from which emerges a new tribe to start again: this is the story of the Exodus (Israel from Egypt over those storied forty years), this is the context from which the prophets spoke (Judea from Babylon over those storied fifty years), this is why the gospels were written down, jumping from the oral to the written as the early church emerged from Rome’s Jerusalem over an agonizing sixty, seventy, eighty years. We might not have thought that so we would find ourselves, at a moment when time had come out of joint, thirty, forty years of decline, until, at last, a break, and then (maybe? with any luck?) a new emergence. But here we are. Could be, anyway: maybe here are, with time out of joint, though I hope not, or I hope so.

I guess I’m not sure—the familiar or the emergent? Which shall it be for us?

Holding it all together is the Lord.

The Lord!

Do you believe it? Speaking to people as we ride easy tides (oh, for the days when church was boring!), calling to people when storms rise and floodwaters threaten and everything built is coming apart or burning up, beckoning when all is reduced to rubble: the Lord. The wrecks of time, one of our hymns even calls it, which we sing in that way that’s always stuck me as a strange combination of casual and courageous: here we are, amidst wrecks of time.

Jesus wasn’t exaggerating when he said that the harvest was plentiful, but the laborers were few. He had just spent days, weeks, maybe months overwhelmed with people seeking him out in

pressing need. Having come down the mountain following his preaching on it, the Sermon on the Mount which is the energy source of Matthew's gospel, Jesus then began to work—to heal and cleanse, to touch and restore. Person after person approached him with some request, one even (the woman with the hemorrhage) approaching him from behind and in the hope that he wouldn't notice her touching his garment, by which she knew, simply by touching it, she would be healed; but he turned and did notice her. He calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. He freed a demoniac who was mute in the country of the Gadarenes. And as the crowd that was coming out to him grew, it yet grew, until, at last, their seeming so harassed and helpless had Jesus rethink what was needed here—not just him but others like him, authorized to work in his name.

That us, by the way. The church! Authorized to do the work of the gospel in Jesus' name: the church.

Do you believe it?

I find it interesting that the call of the disciples comes at a different point in the story according to Matthew as it does according to the other gospel writers. In the other narratives, Jesus starts his ministry in gathering disciples whom he then sends out as apostles in his name. But according to Matthew, he calls them only after his appeal had gone out and his ministry had taken on momentum. It's as if Matthew remembers Jesus as developing strategy as he went along. It's as if Jesus according to Matthew didn't anticipate how urgently he'd be received, which suggests Matthew didn't fully understand, or maybe accept, how widely out this appeal was to go.

Really, our gospel writer here: maybe he thought this Jesus was coming just to the Jews, just to reform this old faith, another period of purification. That certainly seems of central concern to Matthew. We see this in his preoccupation with Jesus as one who fulfills the law, or who fulfills the prophets. Over and again in Matthew's version of the story, Jesus is said to have done something in order to fulfill what was prophesied or to have said something in order to recall something long ago promised. Matthew seems to have known the scriptures of the Jews, to have looked to them for guidance and in devotion, and to have therefore likely relied on the religious authorities for proper teaching and right practice.

What he saw instead, though, in those religious authorities—the Pharisees, and the scribes and other Temple hierarchy—was often corruption, or collusion with the imperial authorities, or self-dealing, which might be why his disappointment seems so deep, his disgust so real. This gospel

writer seems personally affronted by the religious authorities, which suggests they really mattered to him—and I can relate. As someone myself in love with Christian tradition and teaching, I find it a personal affront when our signs and symbols are used for what seem cynical ends by self-dealing actors who have little notion of love or mercy, who have interest only in power and domination.

Likewise, this gospel writer seems also deeply needful of Jesus to be the one to make it right again—to make the dangerous partnership of religion and empire come to divorce, to introduce once again the proper order of things, all things of the world governed and given good order by God, the highest authority, the authority of love. See, there can be no marriage of Christ and state, there can be no marriage between religion and empire, for this is to put as equal the domains of political power and power that transcends, that defies, that flows from and to love.

Remember, religion in service of the state ends in crucifixion, a lynching of righteousness.

It's likely, then, I imagine, that this gospel writer figured Jesus was the one who would engage the people Israel so to be again, or at long last, that ancient manifest priestly kingdom, that holy nation which was as such for the whole world. Jesus would engage them, save them, so to renew them. Yes, of course, the whole earth was (and is) the Lord's, but Israel was to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. It *mattered* to Matthew. So, let's do it! Let's get to work!

It's for all this that I think this gospel writer was slow to see Jesus as having come for the whole world, for those beyond this early priestly nation that is the people Israel. And so Matthew's Jesus seems slow to see this as well, saying to these whom he first sent out: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Or maybe he just knew even big things have to start slow: local chapters of a global movement, local congregations of the global church.

We'll have the chance to watch the scope of Jesus' concern widen. Over these next many weeks, we'll be following this gospel narrative, so we'll have to watch for when Jesus according to Matthew comes to understand his mission as wide indeed—this because we're beginning the long season of Pentecost, which stretches over as many as twenty-seven weeks, depending on when Easter falls. This so-called ordinary time: it will bring us to the end of November and will have us with the Gospel of Matthew, following Jesus through his earthly ministry, a steady journey of teaching in parables, healing the sick, debating with the disciples, and the like.

It might be the only ordinary thing we can anticipate in coming months.

Ordinary time: it always comes as a bit of relief to me. Coming down from the high holidays that crest every few weeks from December to May, Ordinary Time always puts us back on the ground, walking with Jesus, time to wonder about the less heady matters of the faith.

I'll admit I found the prospect of the ordinary even more of a relief this year. I'm tired. I'm tired of the extraordinary, the unprecedented, the shocking.

That said, it's a strange time to revisit the apostles, those sent out in Jesus' name, to join in doing Jesus' work—a strange time to revisit these because that's supposed to be us. We're supposed to be latter-day apostles formed in the same mold of those earliest apostles, sent out in the same spirit and with the same aim: God's reign.

Sent out: fat chance.

The thing is, though, the world is as in need of good news as it's ever been. The world, so constricted, even collapsing, reduced even to ash, is as in need of a fresh spirit as ever it's been. As the many, many social and political constructs of this world show themselves to be painfully, tragically limited, the world is in evermore need of vision; the world is as ever in need of renewed promise that yet wide is the realm of God amidst which we ourselves might make something new, that yet grand is the reign of God which pours forth grace upon grace, this by which we are saved and strengthened and filled with a new spirit as of old. The world is as ever in need of the church, where we tell a different story of how all this came to be, of what role sin has played in degrading our aim and perverting our desire and corrupting our use of power, and of what possibility there is for contrition among the once-mighty who have a lot to atone for and what power there in admitting need for forgiveness, which allows for rebirth.

The world is as ever in need of the church, where we gather in the shelter of a most enduring sanctuary, a most inspiring tent of meeting which is the whole dome of the sky, and which weathers the storms of history and withstands amidst the wrecks of time, and which wherein we bear witness to a coming kingdom, the manifestation of which we can lend our lives to (for what greater joy is there than this?) but which we couldn't stop if we wanted to (for God's providence is a most powerful tide.) Yet who would want to? For it is a powerful tide of love, of justice, of mercy, of perfection, which is wholeness and beauty and fulfillment of all promise.

The world is as ever in need of the church—even these little outposts of it, Monterey, Lenox. Believe it or not, people look to us to hold on to that starry vision. People look to us to hold onto the compelling assurance that things yet hold, us to be held in the conviction that the Lord yet holds—though time might be out of joint, the Lord is as resilient ligament. People don't want us to capitulate to the constrictions that many yet have, these constrictions now collapsing as they are. (And good riddance to more than a few.) People want us instead to keep the faith, to hold it that they might one day join us in this holding.

Stand firm, then, little churches, where the laborers are indeed few. Stand firm and stay nimble for we have work to do, the harvest true.

Do you believe it?

I do.

Thanks be to God.