

6th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 2.16.25

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)

What Matthew remembers as a sermon on the mount Luke remembers as a sermon on the plain, “a level place,” it’s called in this translation.

I’ve never read anything that’s satisfied my wondering why, why the difference.

It’s not uncommon, of course, that the gospels would disagree on the details.

We’ve got four gospel narratives, as you might know, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That’s the order in which they appear in the Bible. But that’s likely not the order in which they were written. Mark is probably earliest, Matthew and Luke were probably written around the same time, ten to twenty years later than Mark, and John is likely the latest written, or perhaps according to some reputable scholarship the earliest. None were written around the same time Jesus lived; none were written by eye-witnesses to the events recounted in the narratives. Except maybe John. Maybe.

There’s a lot we don’t know and indeed can’t know until there’s a major archeological find, something that may or may not happen.

For all this, it's frequent that the three synoptic gospels—the three that offer a synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry, passion and death, and in two cases resurrection—nonetheless recount the order of events differently or recount the setting of the events differently.

These inconsistencies have been thought evidence of the basic untruth of it all, that it was all fabricated by some fanciful folks, credulous ancients who couldn't think as clearly as we moderns can. Worse, it's been thought the whole enterprise was a cynical ploy to exercise power as can only be done by claiming to speak for the Most High God (which is itself a fabrication, so say some).

I regard these inconsistencies differently. I regard them as making this testimony less incredible, more credible, more something I can trust and believe. Such an event as the resurrection of one dead, and the reading back onto his life signs of God's presence, indications of God's surprising beauty manifest: this seems more the sort of thing that would land in people's memories differently one to the next, would play out in people's imaginations differently as to its significance and its effect, differently one to the next. It's all too big to fit into a unanimity on every detail. It's all too grand and world-changing to be reduced to one thread of narrative.

By this it also defies the power-mongering of one person. By this it demands a democratic witness to the one truth, and insists upon the essential honesty that can only be expressed in many voices of many perspectives.

And, yes, there can be a too radical departure from that. There can be a telling of the story that amounts to too great a departure, such that it doesn't hold. This was the question brought to bear on deciding what versions of the story would be included in the Bible, in the biblical canon, back in the day, back in the 5th century. There were, and are, some versions of the gospel deemed too divergent to hold, too deviating from the norm and truth to keep.

That said, the mutli-vocal telling, the four versions that stand in all their similarity and difference, suggests to me more of truth, not less—a group wisdom in it all, a breadth of testimony that provides a broad foundation for voicing a world-changing event.

The Gospel of Luke remembers Jesus preaching not on a mount but on a level place, having just come down from a mount to a level place.

The Gospel of Luke also remembers the crowd having come from Jerusalem and all Judea, but also Tyre and Sidon. This is to say the crowd comprised of Jews (from Judea) and Gentiles (from Sidon). And this is to say that what each group saw in the coming down of Jesus and also of the twelve who'd been up the mountain praying with him was both similar but also different.

The Jews might have seen in the coming down of Jesus and the twelve something of Moses, and the twelve tribes of the people Israel, and the giving of a life-allowing law. When down they came, according to the story, Jesus and also 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: this would have recalled Moses and the twelve tribes, bearers of wisdom from on high and brought to the people, a level place.

The Gentiles gathered there that day according to Luke might well have seen something similar, though also different. The religious life of Graeco-Roman citizens would have born traces of the gods of old. 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. [They resembled] 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.” These were Zeus and also Poseidon, Hephaestus, Hermes, Ares, Apollo, Hera, Athene, Artemis, Hestia, Aphrodite, Demeter, Dionysus. The Twelve, all up there, and only occasionally to come down, and mostly just to mess with the likes of us: the descent of this one, Jesus, and his twelve apostles, might have come to the Gentiles gathered in the crowd as a shocking contrast, an appealing contrast.

A few months ago, I preached on our changing politics, and the emboldening happening among an influential few who don't believe in equality and aren't shy in saying so anymore, who don't believe equality is true when it comes to people and who therefore don't aim to pursue it in our politics. I said then, something I was only newly aware of myself back in July, “They believe in an elite who are rightful in their holding power and wielding power. It's an old Nietzschean idea that fueled the Fascists of the 20th century, and that liberal democracy thought itself to have defeated, but that's making a comeback because liberal democracy is slow and decadent and weak (so they say). It can't defend itself.”

Since preaching that, I've only become more familiar with this odious thinking, and, along with all of us, become familiar with what it looks like in playing out.

Elon Musk does not believe in equality. He believes, as Heather Cox Richardson said in her Politics Chat from February 11th, that the human race on the whole will die out, that a worthy few will colonize other planets, among these few Musk shall be the visionary and technician, and

that the wealth of the United States and indeed the whole world is only rightly used to make that happen. Anything else is shortsighted, wasteful. Why spend our wealth on making poor people's lives less stressful? Why spend our wealth on making sick people less likely to die of their sickness? This is shortsighted, indeed decadent. It is government waste.

J.D. Vance also doesn't believe in equality, apparently at least. He believes that power is rightly wielded by a select few, an anti-elite elite who rule from a place of grievance for the sake of vengeance, if vengeance less violent than smug. Admittedly, this isn't some high place, far up and away. This isn't Mt. Olympus or Mars or what have you. But it is very much influenced by the online demiurge Marcus Yarvin, who once blogged under the name Mencius Moldbug and who has become the intellectual overlord of much of Silicon Valley and more recently the White House.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, that was more like a wrestling match with an octopus who happened to have a deep read of history if coming to all the wrong conclusions, Yarvin tossed a word salad, which for a moment touched on democracy. This he claimed is basically a code word for "good government," which is why people get apoplectic when you say you're not in favor of democracy. It's like you're saying you're not in favor of good government, claims Yarvin.

But I don't know anyone who speaks of democracy to mean generically good government. Democracy indicates a specific form of government. It means government by the people, by the *demos*.

See, because words have meanings, meanings that are more stable than not; and the trick people like Yarvin use is to cause their interlocutor to doubt that, to come to suppose that words can mean whatever the one using them claims they mean—that meaning is a matter of power rather than stable and communicable truth.

Yarvin does not believe in democracy, but he realizes saying so is offensive to many Americans over whom he'd like to exercise power, if only the power of cleverness and leaving political power to others who operate as his puppets. He believes in monarchy whose monarch acts like a CEO, and more specifically the CEO of a Silicon Valley startup where the best way is to move fast and break things.

There is implied in this, if not a disdain for those who can't keep up and will likely be among the broken things, then at least a disregard for those who can't keep up and will likely be among the broken things—which, by the way, is most of us, and will be all of us at some point in

our lives. We were all babies once, for example, helpless, unable to keep up, reliant on a common belief that babies, as humans, deserve intense nurture and care. We will some of us be old someday, if we aren't already so, and probably hopeful that we won't be treated the way the elderly would have been in the Graeco-Roman world. None of us will get out here without going through some phase wherein we rely on mercy and care, not a CEO cutting inefficiency but a human being prizing care.

Efficiency is not our highest good.

These are new gods: Musk, Yarvin, Andreessen, Vance. They are as the gods of old, who deign only enough to mess with the likes of us—and in their regard, Jesus comes in contrast, in gracious correction. He comes to move slowly and to heal things, to embrace things, to restore things to fullness and redeem things to fulfillment, perfection, to love things—people, creatures, all creation—into their full loveliness. To love things into our full loveliness.

Luke's gospel remembers Jesus preaching on a level place. Surrounded by crowds of common people from both worlds, Jew and Gentile, Jesus stood among them with word of blessing, with warning word of woe.

The great reversal, it's often called, the vision in the Gospel of Luke and the second book by the same writer, the Acts of the Apostles; the great reversal in which the humble shall be exalted and the mighty shall be brought down from their thrones. We first hear of it in Mary's song following when the angel Gabriel had gone to her with word of whether she'd become the mother of God. We next hear of it in this, Jesus' preaching on the plain. We hear of it in stories of Lazarus and Dives, of the rich man with the bumper crop and ever bigger barn. It's to suggest that worldly power means nothing in the kingdom of heaven, that worldly wealth seems embarrassing, a silly obsession and a trinket of a prize, when considered from the perspective of the reign of God.

We will follow Luke's gospel this year, a gospel where the great reversal is a recurrent theme and where the driver of such a thing is the Holy Spirit. Luke's gospel in particular is marked by the frequent mention of the Holy Spirit, the apparent faith that it's by the Holy Spirit that anything of significance happens at all. When Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes down, alighting on him like a dove. When he goes into the wilderness where he would be tempted by the devil, he is driven there by the Holy Spirit. When he preaches to a crowd, he's just prior been somewhere at prayer communing with the Holy Spirit. And when he has ascended to heaven and the apostles are newly empowered to continue in his gracious work, it is by the Holy Spirit that they are so sent out, the Holy Spirit having come on the day of Pentecost, like a thunderous fire, to

fashion of all these people one body come to be called the church, so common place and so highly charged.

The Holy Spirit is a radically democratic person of God, the three-in-one who arrives as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is a radically democratic offering of God in the world, knowing no bounds, honoring no human hierarchy. The Holy Spirit delivers the fire of the gods, the gods who congratulate themselves on high for being so very rightly exalted, delivering it rather to people, all people, that it might sustain and warm and nurture.

It is a gracious coincidence that this year we'll be following Luke's gospel as it imagines God coming so mightily and so humbly to each and all. It's a gracious coincidence because this year it seems we're in for the fight of our lives—to wrestle our democratic governance back from an elite who think it belongs to them. So few and so fickle and so utterly ridiculous, internet edgelords stumbling their way into the Oval Office where, like a child picking his nose and wiping the booger on the Resolute desk, can't even imagine the damage they do while countless people across the world are already feeling it, painfully feeling it: they are as gods who deign to this our world merely to mess with the likes of us, mindlessly to mess with the likes of us, and we are in for the geo-political fight of our lives.

But we take on the fight in the faith that this belongs to us: we the people. We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity take it on because the wisdom of a life-giving law that once would have belonged for interpreting and exercising only to an elite, now has come down and rested on each of us and all of us together.

Jesus preached on a level place according to Luke's telling, a difference that makes all the difference in getting to the truth.

Thanks be to God.