

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.27.20

When all falls away,
this remnant of what's real: Church.
Seek, hold its frayed hem.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Matthew 21:23-27

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things...' (370)

As you know, when you row these days, you row a single. As you know, there are no team boats on the water, not these days. It's impossible to "socially distance" when you're strapped into a narrow shell. A narrow line of people, grunting, sweating to move the boat across the water? If any has COVID, soon enough all will have COVID. As you know, these days, when you row, you row a single.

The thing is (as you know), by this point in the season, in the early morning, when you're to be out on the water, there's usually either too much wind or too much fog to make the going all that good.

Rowing a single in the wind is tricky. It's too unstable. You can't get a good grip on the water. The fog is no better. The water beneath fog is smooth, smooth. But you can't see where you're going. You can barely see where you've been, your wake, that line you've made in the water a few meters, not much more.

It's this formless void: it's tough to take.

As you know, when the fog comes in, it can swallow everything. That feeling of occupying a point in space with no points of reference anywhere around you that make any sense: it's a spooky feeling, especially if you're prone to spooky feelings.

Are you someone who can feel silence as punishing, at least often as you feel it as soothing?

Are you someone for whom aloneness can feel as desolate as it does at times feel calming?

Do you sleep with a nightlight on?

You know, there's more darkness than daylight as of last week.

When you look around and all you see is water, either as water or as fog, it can put you in a pre-created state of mind—back before the beginning when all there was, was watery chaos, that formless void, that darkened deep.

Some people can handle an existential vacuum.

Others can't.

You have your days.

I have mine.

The people Israel at least had each other. And at least their problem wasn't one of only water. But it was one of not nearly enough water, and that's just as bad. Plus, all that wilderness. The place-points of reference to orient yourself aren't so close as a swallowing fog. But they are as far as distant horizon in all directions, and that's just as bad. (Is the Lord with us, or not?)

When the Lord had called them out of Egypt, it had seemed like such a *good* thing. They had been captives. Now they would be free. They had been exploited. Now their work would be for their own wellbeing, and their neighbors' and the poor in their midst—the orphan, the widow. They had been abused, could be beaten at the master's will. Now the only beating they would take would be of the sort that life always doles out—hardship; loneliness, or the intensity of mixed company; anxiety, or pressing fear; starvation, thirst. In the context of loving community, though, those beatings don't beat you, don't defeat you. They had been instruments of empire. Now they

would be people in bare relationship with one another and with their Lord—their mysterious, hidden, silent-until-he-speaks Lord. Their absent-until-he-acts God. (Is the Lord among us, or not?)

Time was I preached on this sort of story wistfully, an “if only” attitude: as if.

Time wasn’t so long ago. Remember when everything seemed so secure? Precarious for some, of course, but all in all in so secure. And that was the problem. There was no escape from the heavy yoke of “our way of life.” Then, I could preach wistfully about the prospect of being much more free, even if that meant being in free fall, because “as if.” It doesn’t seem so long ago that it seemed things would never change.

The Bible is full of these sorts of stories. Maybe even the Bible is such a story—of people building up and then emerging from the strictures of their built world (emerging by force, emerging by choice). Jesus himself did this all the time—entering and emerging, entering and emerging. It’s like he wanted to learn what was inside by so often going outside. It’s like he eventually wanted us to follow him, out, out.

This is what is what’s implied in the gospel story for today, his having apparently utterly disrupted everything.

Everything.

When the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Jesus and asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” “these things” were in reference to all the things Jesus had done since he set foot in Jerusalem and even long before. Incredibly disruptive. Recklessly destabilizing.

It’s worth saying that the chief priests and elders were emblems of stability, for all the good and bad of it. They were the real power brokers of Israel and Judea. Their realm of exercising power was the Temple.

The Temple: it was the site of the people’s religion. It was a marketplace. It was the court of appeals. It was the place of negotiation between the occupying empire, Rome, and this one people occupied, the Jews. And the chief priests and elders: their work in the Temple made for peace in the land.

The chief priests and the elders: they were depended upon but not trusted.

As for Jesus, who was he? Just someone off in a corner teaching.

The chief priests and elders approached him—because he wasn't really just off in a corner teaching. All week long, now, he'd shown himself to be far more trouble than that.

First, there was the way he entered Jerusalem, the “triumphal entry.” You remember it from Palm Sunday, when he came down from the Mount of Olives as if ready for battle, the Mount of Olives being where an invading army might assemble and strategize for taking the city in its sights below.

He entered through the city gate, though, in a mock parade of spoofed grandeur. Riding a donkey as if it were a warhorse. Followed by peasants as if they were a king's courtiers. If he were taking the city, then it was in subversion, not invasion.

Next, he went into the courtyard of the Temple, where he overturned the tables of moneychangers and the seats of those who sold animals for sacrifice (doves, maybe some sheep). He yelled at the people there, people who weren't doing anything wrong, who were doing what they'd always done, providing pilgrims with what they needed for worship.

Then, after spending the night in Bethany, he returned to the city and, hungry, he came across a fig tree. It bore no fruit. No surprise. It wasn't in season. Whatever. Jesus cursed the fig tree. Now it would never bear fruit.

Defiant of the customs of the city, its pomp and pageantry; defiant of the laws of the Temple, its rites and life-giving order; defiant even of the laws of nature, its seasons and growth: on what authority?

It's like he was *asking* to be crucified. Worse, it's like he was hoping the whole known world would collapse. As if something better might be found abiding behind and beneath and above and among it all. That ancient truth peeking out to us all from behind the veneers of the world: as if. Some secret seed of what is truly good even now taking root, some hidden hope of a better, truer, more abounding reality than mere law and order even now pressing forth: as if.

Jesus was like this from the beginning, though, someone whose very being promised disruption. The immaculate conception? The virgin birth? You're wrong to think this indicates God as squeamish about sex. What's really implied here is Jesus, from the start, as disrupting the way things are, the “facts of life.” He was an interruption into history of something transcendent. He was a violation of human norms and of nature's way—as if that's good news. As if.

So would go his life and ministry. Always transgressing the law (working on the Sabbath), even violating the holiness code (eating with sinners and interacting with people who were a public health threat for their being unclean), Jesus apparently answered to an authority other than the religious authorities. But what authority? On what authority did he do these things?

It's a fair question—because there's a real cost here. There's a cost to what Jesus was up to. Disrupting the status quo is risky, can even be dangerous. If there's one thing we've learned from COVID, it's surely this—that, though the status quo might be far from perfect, the loss of it isn't something to be trifled with.

Time was, I trifled with it. As a preacher, it was an idea I once played with. I remember loving Jesus for his defiance of the status quo, for his rejection of the good enough. I remember leaning into the possibility that all this might loosen its grip on our lives and imaginations—militarism, consumerism, racism, the competitiveness of the meritocracy, the winner-takes-all of our elected governance, the hobbling of our religious imagination (cheap religion, brittle consideration of scripture, shallow spirituality, kitschy worship), the countless ways in which we are not free. I trifled with it because it was unlikely ever to happen.

It wasn't that long ago.

Suddenly... (Is the Lord with us, or not?)

Here's Walter Brueggemann, on the people's emerging from empire—Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar, preacher, member of the United Church of Christ. “The exodus liberation promised a new existence for Israel, filled with joy, freedom, and well-being. However, the withdrawal from the imperial system of Egypt brought Israel only to the wilderness, which gave no well-being. The wilderness is a place of no water. The wilderness is a place where the guaranteed life-supports of empire are missing. Thus, Israel was plunged into crisis...

“The Egyptian imperial system had given neither dignity nor freedom, but it had offered a steady supply of food and water, if in exchange for servitude...

“Now, out of empire, in the leanness of wilderness faith, Israel's need and thirst and yearning lead to restlessness and an outcry against the leadership of Moses. Moses, however, isn't the real leader...Yahweh is...For this reason, Moses questions and accuses God. Yahweh, in turn, offers a response both abrupt and decisive—an issuing of a command and a promise.”

The command: “Go on ahead of the people, take some of the elders with you; take your walking stick and go.”

The promise: “I will be standing there in front of you.”

“The promise is as lean and as unaccommodating as the command... Moses obeys. Yahweh delivers. Water comes. Israel drinks. The crisis is averted. The narrative tells us all this in one brief sentence—this situation in which Yahweh sustained life but in a lean, precarious, anxiety-producing way that requires deep trust.”

Deep trust.

Is it there for you? Deep trust?

Dig.

Can you find it?

The other morning, you were rowing, and fog fell. You couldn't see much past the stern of the shell, the tips of the oar blades. You put out of your mind your friend who got caught on this same lake in a fog a few years ago. In a little motorized dingy, she putted along for a few minutes and then just stopped. Waited. Over an hour. The fog lifted and she found herself in a place on the lake she never would have guessed. But you can't sit in a shell for over an hour. That would be too unnerving. You row. Slowly. Slowly.

Eventually, the shore. Rocks, some overgrowth of green.

You put yourself parallel to it, grasping its craggy hem. This remnant of reality: stay close and follow it around. It brings you home.

Thanks be to God.