

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.23.20

Isaiah 51:1-6

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.² Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.³ For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.⁴ Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.⁵ I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope.⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (401)

I sometimes reflect on my life of Sundays in church. My family was an every-Sunday church-going family, though to be honest I don't know why. I suppose it was more about temperament than religious fervor. We were just regular that way—like one of those clocks that are regular, even stating so on the case or face.

I see nothing wrong with being regular like that.

We lived in a small town, my sister and I attended the one town school, and we all four were regulars in the one town church—congregational, UCC. It was a healthy congregation, enjoying long pastorates. Mr. Guth, who baptized me when I was three months old, served there for ten years until he died unexpectedly. Then Mr. McConnell came, and served for twenty-one years, retiring when I was in divinity school. I still have regular conversations with him.

Clearly, this was an important part of my life, and the life of my family.

That said, is it strange that very little of the actual content of our common life has stayed with me? I don't remember much of what tended to be preached from that pulpit. I don't remember any actual insights from Sunday school or confirmation class. (I should admit, I often can't remember the sermon from last Sunday, and I'm the one who wrote and preached it. So, you know...) What I *do* remember is the experience of it all, the feeling of being there—at coffee hour, at the Christmas Eve service. I remember being *known*, and knowing others, for all the good and bad of that.

I'm okay with all this. I don't actually think remembering the content of the faith is the truest aim of Christian practice. Church-life isn't a matter of cognition. It's more about recognition. Following Christ isn't a matter of comprehension but apprehension (as Walton said once in Bible study)—apprehension in all the ways that word indicates, which is anxiety, and arrest, and a gut-level grasping of otherwise concealed truth.

Really, *how* we are is who we are.

I've noticed that a lot of church websites prominently feature "What We Believe." It's often even a phrase on the drop-down menu option: "What We Believe." This is often the case for evangelical and mega churches, and often the first thing mentioned on the bullet point list of what they believe is the Bible. God will come second; the Bible comes first. This is warped, if you ask me. It's all warped, the whole notion of a bullet-point list. The Bible shouldn't take primacy of place over God, and "What We Believe" should be much less of a concern than "How We Are," and *this* bullet point list might then read: "We are patient and kind. We are not jealous or boastful or arrogant or rude." Or this: "We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Or this, the essence of which we used for the call to worship: "We recognize in one another the presence of the Holy Spirit."

Have you ever noticed that Paul seems much more concerned with how members of the congregations he corresponded with *behaved* toward one another than he was concerned with what they believed? It's as if *how* the congregations were in regard to one another were indeed who they were.

Funny thing, Matthew's gospel is the only one that remembers Jesus to have imagined a church, a formal institution gathered and kept going for the purpose of carrying on after he was

gone. I didn't know that until this time round with the Gospel of Matthew—that only Matthew's conception of following Christ includes the instituting of something such as church. I just read it in a commentary a few weeks ago. An *ekklesia*, which is the Greek word that translates to church: it's only here. By this, Jesus seemed to understand, he would have the sort of effect that not even death could call into question, neither his own (which he'd now realized was coming) nor the death of any, or even all of, his friends, nor the passing even of one generation to the next.

The church would withstand.

This is what's meant when Jesus explained to Peter that not even “the gates of Hades” would prevail against the church. Hades is by way of saying death. So, what Jesus in had in mind was a church that would last, and would outlast, would indeed be a manifestation of what shall be last, the reign of God, the consummation of all things in God—whatever bound in the *ekklesia* bound also in the reign of God, whatever let loose in the *ekklesia* also let loose in the reign of God.

For what it's worth, this is the claim as regards the church that I find most difficult to take, to say nothing of to understand. I guess I don't believe that the church would, or even could, have such a powerful influence as to shape the realm of God.

What I can imagine is Jesus' urging upon Peter an understanding that the power the church will exercise on earth will surpass that of perhaps all other earthly institutions. I can hear as true this claim of Jesus as a word of warning to Peter, and by extension to the church. “Be careful what you do in my name.” It's as if Jesus were saying to Peter while handing him the keys, “Be cautious with how you exercise the power of the Holy Spirit. The effect of the church will redound unto God, will redound unto people's faith.”

Because this is true. When clergy abuse their authority, how much worse is that abuse in effect. When the church abuses its authority, how much more violated do those suffering or witnessing the abuse feel.

It all doubles down with bad effect.

I guess that's how I hear this passage, which is a commissioning of the likes of us as much as it was of Peter himself. Any of us involved in the likes of this congregation are but stewards of something that is both our inheritance and our bequest, which makes our power and influence potentially great indeed.

For this, the church maybe wasn't such a great idea.

And yet it had to be because Jesus had come all this way—from eternity into time. And he had gone through this terrific effort—teaching in parables, healing the sick, gathering disciples and training them in the way, commissioning them as apostles and sending them out in his name. And he would eventually undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day rise again. And all of that might come to nothing if there weren't an intentional body to continue to live in this way—to teach and to heal, to study and to practice, to go out with good news which is for all the world and to gather in any and all who seek to live their lives with love as the center, a body of mutual care out of which pours an abounding grace. By this, the world will be saved. By this, the world will have been saved—the future perfect tense because already in Christ on the cross it has been done, and yet it is still ours to do.

So, maybe it was all too much, and therefore not such a great idea to implement, and yet how much worse is the world when no aspirational body acts in its midst, when no people come together to enact some high calling, when we all just accept that we're terrible and the world is terrible so we can just go on being terrible, doing our worst because, well, why not?

An *ekklesia*: no other gospel narrative mentions any such thing.

But maybe that's the surprise here—that everyone else left that part out.

It's probably that Matthew was so involved in the synagogue. That's what it seems, anyway. And so of course he would remember Jesus to have operated with a similar aim. One in every village, the synagogue was a school for being trained in the way of the people, studying the scriptures and recalling the ancient stories and reciting the ancient psalms. Prayer was a part of it, but real worship, which is to say sacrifice, was to happen in the Temple.

The Temple was destroyed, of course, by the time of Matthew's writing. Ten or twenty years prior, in the year 68, the felling of the Temple scrambled the question as to where was learning to happen and where was worship. But the Temple had been destroyed before, back in 586 BCE. It had been a temporary problem, one solved fifty years later, in 536 with the building of the second Temple. It would be a temporary problem now, in the year 70 or 80, though it's a problem still not solved these two thousand years later.

That's actually where we are with Isaiah this morning. The prophetic text speaks to us from the time just prior to when the people could resettle in the land and could build anew: the second Temple. As of now, though, they were exiled from all the forms that used to hold, all the practices

that used to regulate them as a people and orient them in place and time. Babylon had attacked, had destroyed the city and the Temple, and had exiled the people from their land; and now those people had but this—their stories, their memories and hopes and ancient stories.

These, though, apparently, should be felt as a rock. These, apparently, could be counted on as firm foundation for their continuing on, steady and sturdy, regular and reliable. It's an astonishing thing to claim, but it's also true. When you know who you are, you can persevere in surprising ways. And it's difficult to know whence that self-knowledge comes. It's a mystery as to what such solid selfhood or soulfulness even looks like, perhaps a mystery more to the likes of us modern materialists than to other people of other cultures and times. We often miss the things we can't observe and prove. But as we all suffer under the leadership of a hollow man whose whims redound as rule and whose moods redound as dictates, we're maybe more open to the mystifying notion that things as apparently ephemeral as personality and character, both individual and collective, can be felt as solid as rock, dug out from quarries of thick community and true story.

This ecclesia, then, would be a combination of synagogue and Temple, a place of worship and prayer, and of study and learning. Since there was no *place* that the church could consider its center—no Jerusalem or its like—each of these gathered bodies would be as the Temple, and each would also be the village synagogue. And it would begin here, with Peter's confession. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Not that Peter knew exactly what that meant. This revelation, which might have come to him just at this moment or might have been a growing suspicion as he witnessed wonders one after another (Jesus healing the sick, feeding the countless many, calming a storm, withstanding his own heartbreak at the death of his cousin), hadn't come of Peter's own figuring but of something visited upon him, an epistemological phenomenon that we moderns simply can't accept. We simply can't accept that sometimes knowledge arrives to us fully formed or even ahead of itself, as insight whose full meaning we don't yet know. We simply prefer reason to revelation. When it comes to what we know and how we know it, we are more impressed with our own capacity for reason than for some more mysteriously sourced revelation.

But such was the case with Peter's insight—it was revelation and not reason, it was something produced not of flesh and blood but of God. So, he knew the truth. He just didn't

know its full implications. He just didn't know what Jesus being the Messiah would entail. This is what it would entail—suffering, death.

“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

This, Peter would utter just a few verses later, according this gospel, in a passage which we might hear next week in worship, Matthew noting that from that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering. This, Peter rebukes him for, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” making it clear that Peter was still operating under some mistaken assumptions of what being the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, actually means, actually looks like.

It would be all about power, and nothing about vulnerability, right?

It would be all about glory, and none about shame.

Right?

To be fair to Peter, these are mistaken assumptions that still prevail. The so-called Prosperity Gospel is but one prominent example. This would proclaim that God wants for you prosperity, personal wealth, which means, if you're rich, then you're rightfully so. You've found favor with God, and you can receive all that prosperity as proof of this, and you can keep all that prosperity to yourself as your just reward. This also means that, if you're not rich, it's your own fault. You have no one to blame but yourself, and your lack of faith or your feebleness of vision, and your bad decisions made one after another. Of course, what all this means as regards the one who is both the beloved Son of God and also the crucified one, I couldn't possibly say because that's not much explained. The crucified Lord doesn't feature much in this so-called gospel. The beloved and suffering Son is not much there to be found, which is why critics of this teaching, of which I am one, claim there are but scraps of Christianity amidst it all.

So, Peter wasn't alone in insisting that Jesus must not suffer (and, by implication, that those who follow Jesus will be released from all suffering.) There's a now long tradition of this, a habitual return to it. Peter was just the first to do it. But who can blame him? He didn't have the church by which to cultivate such counter-intuitive compassion. No, for he himself would be the cornerstone of the church that would cultivate such counter-intuitive compassion, such mutual abounding care.

I know the fact of the church as an institution is unpopular these days. Most institutions are, though that might be changing, one of the many, many things that seem to be changing. As we teeter on a brink we've been racing toward for years, decades, we might find ourselves less eager to rage against *every* machine, to dismantle *every* system. Some things need organization and collective action. Good things in the world deserve instituting and propagating. As our whole culture faces an immediate future that doesn't include, for example, a functioning school system for our young, we realize perhaps how crucial some systems are to the workings of everything else in life, from the planning of our next day to the envisioning of years and decades to come. As our culture also flirts with churchlessness, I wonder what we might find as to what that would actually look like.

Poet Phillip Larkin wondered the same. In 1954, he approached a church very much from the outside. While out biking one day, as was his wont to do, he stopped into an empty church, and went on to write the poem, "Church Going."

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,

And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

May we be a people and place amidst which it is proper to grow wise, it is indeed very likely
to grow wise.

May we steward an institution whose lively mission it might ever continue to be, that we follow Christ in such ways as are evident, manifest, and teachable to those who would come to join in on this mission.

May we ever be a body whose practice makes real the realm of God—as above, so below. Thanks and praise. Thanks and praise. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.