

Sermon Proper 11B1 July 18, 2021 Fr. Nick Smith

2 Samuel 7:1-14a Psalm 89:20-37 Ephesians 2:11-22 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

If you're looking for a summer reading suggestion, a book to read while sitting by the pool or on an airplane on route to a vacation holiday, might I recommend the Gospel of Mark. It's not a long read. It will take just an hour or two, or more, depending on whether or not you accompany the reading with a bit of prayer, too. Mark's Gospel, the earliest one of the four which survived those ancient days and became canonized into the New Testament of the Bible, is a curious piece of literature. It's more than just a biography of Jesus, more than just a news report of things which took place in Galilee and Jerusalem in those days, more than just a collection of precepts which were being taught and shared during those times; it is scripture. It is one person's attempt to let the Holy Spirit speak through his memory and his understanding about people and events and truths which should shape the lives and thoughts and prayers of people in his own generation, and beyond. The author of Mark hoped, I think, to provide a vehicle through which God could truly share Good News, and rally those who heard or read it to significant "work" in their own time and place.

And the story, the story of Jesus, moves right along. As you read it, the plot unfolds quickly and without a lot of lavish commentary. You might not notice that, as we read various snippets and passages here in church, but when you sit at your leisure and read the whole story, it can captivate you and lead you along, almost episodically, from one scene to the next. Oh, sure, you can take the time to savor particular words, or you can let the occasional metaphor drift you away in thought and reflection, but you may soon find that what seems like random bits of information are collecting into a larger body of witness, and you may be captivated into finding out just what comes next. Many sentences begin with a word translated from the Greek as the conjunction "and", as if the sentences were "run-on" syntactical errors, but the author is really, I think, leading us forward. This happened, and then this, and then afterwards that happened...The author of Mark is masterfully leading us down a path of interpretive memory and history, choosing and arranging episodes to keep us involved in the important story, even if it is somehow so familiar that we pretend we know it so well.

The whole book is just 16 chapters long, and the author doesn't let himself become distracted by marginal story-lines, extra characters, or long flowery discourses. There is no Christmas story, for example, no sermon on the mount, no beatitudes, no discussion of Mary's dilemma or Simeon's visions, not even the Lord's prayer; Mark's witness has to do solely with God's intentions to save the world, and the work of God's son and his apostles in that monumental and crucial effort. And along the way, Mark needs to clear up some conventional misconceptions. The people had been longing for one kind of messiah, but they were given a different, a better one by God, and that story needed to be told. As we heard in today's reading, the people were like a sheep without a shepherd, a fact which even Moses long before had recognized, and which is probably true enough even today. So, what does God intend to do about it? That's the plot of this book. And, while there are different endings available in the early manuscripts of this book, most scholars agree that it originally ended in a cliff-hanger...but I won't spoil the ending for you.

Our Gospel readings in church these past weeks have been episodes from the sixth chapter of Mark's Book of Good News, and a lot happens in this chapter. Jesus, in an attempt to let the ripples of his ministry spread out far and wide, sends his disciples, his protégés, out into the remote villages to carry God's message of forgiveness and reconciliation, that their faith might be restored and their communities strengthened. We heard about this scheme in our reading a couple of weeks ago. Now, while they are

out and about in the countryside, word reaches Jesus that his cousin, John the baptizer, has been murdered by Herod, the Galilean governor. That event, as described by Mark in a portion of chapter six we heard last week, was, aside from Jesus' own crucifixion, perhaps the most gruesome incident in the whole story. In order to simply save face in front of his banquet guests, Herod orders John's head to be brought to him on a platter. He had promised his daughter, in front of everyone that evening, that she could have anything she wished, remember? And her evil mother, who hated John, told her to ask for his head, that it could be presented to her right then and there in triumph and in sight of everyone.

But the immorality doesn't end there, with hateful murder. In case you missed it last week, Herod had not arrested and imprisoned John for some seditious threat to his authority, but because he liked having John around for his entertainment! You may remember that John was an eccentric character, whose ranting and raving Herod found to be an amusing distraction. He grew to even like John. But for the sake of his reputation, Herod had John killed, just like that, with only a passing regret that he wouldn't have John around as his pet anymore. What a grim tale of immorality was being told about that society, where John's human life was considered so expendable, where life itself was being regarded so cheaply! In Mark's Gospel, this is the first such real evidence of the awful state of affairs into which Jesus has been sent to minister. As a reader, it should bring you up short. As a disciple, it ought to make you realize what we are up against. As Jesus, it might make you think it's time to really get serious now. The people are like sheep without a shepherd, and the time is short, and the mission a lot more urgent than perhaps was thought.

So, this is the world into which the disciples return from visiting all those outlying villages. They have been out practicing their new craft of ministry as Jesus has taught them, and when they get back, they are greeted with this upsetting news. Jesus leads them off for a group retreat, encouraging them to take a step back, to have a restful and prayerful time to re-group. They might think that it's a reward for all the good work they have done and about which they have reported back to the Master, but, in truth, it is probably more about restoring their stamina for new and more difficult work ahead. From Chapter six onward in this book, the way forward will be much more demanding and focused. After this reminder of the importance of their work, this murder of one of the faith's most familiar heroes, the danger a missionary faces while spreading the ripples out into the world, well, it becomes much more tangible. Whether it's feeding the five thousand, which also takes place in chapter six, or hearing Jesus' cryptic foreshadowing of the crucifixion, everything now becomes urgent, everything becomes more significant. And it's not just a matter of managing crises, it is a matter of saving the world.

So, we too are now re-gathering and re-grouping in the presence of our Lord and Master, and are invited into a prayerful retreat of sorts. There may be time now for intricate metaphors and reflective discussions, but don't get too comfortable. While we were each away, ministering as best we knew how to our own figurative villages, much has happened to bring us up-short. Being literally back together, we will be called to resume our mission from the source, sharing our determination and courage. The joy we have in each other's company is indeed refreshing, but it is not a reward for somehow surviving this time of trial, but it is rather a refreshment for what God intends that faithful apostles should do. The people still seem too often like sheep without a shepherd. Mark wanted us to appreciate the re-definition of the nature of the conventional shepherd, and to understand that while we are warriors for the faith, our weapons are not sword and shield, but forgiveness and compassion. Our call, now that we re-gather and re-group, is to carry these truthful and holy weapons into our communities, making waves that ripple ever outward by God's grace. That which we have been through these past months should have made us even more determined than ever to make our faith count and our story more focused. For the need is urgent, and the time is short. And, seriously, invite your friends and neighbors to join us. Amen.