

4th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.22.17

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

I nursed each of my two sons for three years and, different as they are, they nursed differently. Tobias, the older son, would fold into me, curled close for suckling. Jack the younger, from the time when he could physically manage it, would push against my holding him, one hand pushing against my torso or his head pushing against my arm wrapped around and cradling it, his whole body sometimes in clenched state of resistance.

I mentioned this to the two of them recently, and Jack felt sorry. Suspecting that this made Tobias a more gratifying infant, he looked almost ashamed of himself. But, no, I told him. He was gratifying too, though in a different way. He's just always defined himself in differentiation rather than in close identification. He's just always known himself best, had a clear sense of who he was as a person in the world, in pressing up against the world, in insisting that it be different than how it is, if only slightly different.

In short, if Tobias knew himself best as "Yes," Jack knew himself best as "No."

I have to admit, I never really knew that "No" was an option. I'd always thought that "Yes" was the best way—and not just because I was a girl, now a woman. Many of the most influential people in my life all along have been agreeable more than argumentative. But I recall holding Jack, this impossible, self-possessed, powerful little person; and I realize I've learned.

Remember hearing in Sunday school that Jesus was a nice person? I do. Not that this was clearly stated, only that it was implied: Jesus was a nice person, and learning about him was with the aim of becoming nice people—well-behaved, polite, obedient.

I don't think Rome bothered with crucifying nice people.

When Jesus withdrew from Nazareth to Galilee, it was because he'd heard that John was arrested. This move made it so what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled—an important notion to this gospel writer. That prophecy is fulfilled, that scripture is fulfilled: the writer of this gospel, Matthew, seems to have been particularly concerned that the holy scriptures of his people and day be understood as fulfilled in Jesus.

Why he was concerned with this is a matter of speculation.

I suspect that, Matthew, as a Jew, was concerned that Jesus not be dismissed as an aberration of Jewish teaching and tradition; and that he not be seen as a break from that long history, the start of something both new and unrelated. I think Matthew was concerned that this seemingly new way, which he had come to embrace, be understood as a continuation of the old way, a grafting on to, or fulfillment of, what had come before. Perhaps understanding that Jesus would introduce an irreconcilable split among his people—and within himself, even—Matthew wouldn't let that go without a fight. He wanted both to be a Jew, as ever he was, and to be a follower of Christ and moreover an evangelist for Christ.

That wouldn't easily be the case, of course; and it would for much longer be the case that Jews could also be Christians. If Matthew wrote in the year 70 or 80, then those days were already beginning to fade. From now on, the Church would be a Gentile movement.

As to why this act of resistance on Matthew's part should matter to us—us Christians of 21st century America: it's because it holds us to the truth that Jesus was a Jew, that to love Jesus is to love him as a Jew, and that to follow Jesus is to walk in a way of irreconcilable differences in the hope that God holds all such things resilient love.

But a more crucial cause for Jesus having withdrawn to Galilee (at least for us this morning) is his having heard that John was arrested. At this, the story notes, he withdrew from Nazareth to Galilee, to make his home in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee—which makes it sound as if he stayed there for quite some time. He made his *home* there.

Time is always a difficult thing to gauge in the stories of the Bible. They're told so succinctly, after all. In just a few words, a year can have gone by. In just a paragraph, the story of a whole generation can be implied. But there's also the supposition that we moderns experience time differently. We're conscious of it as linear and limited and chock-full of happenings. We're conscious of ourselves each as individual, active agents, the tracking of whom takes words, paragraphs, books, blogs, newspapers, magazines, journals, dissertations. How can it be that Jesus retreated to Galilee from Nazareth, made his home in Capernaum, and went dark for a week, a month, maybe several months? How could it be that the story takes a six-month pause just as it's getting going?

Well, how could it be otherwise? Merely to go from Nazareth to Capernaum, a 20-mile journey, would have taken a few days—a few days of walking, a few nights of having sought shelter from whomever along the way may have offered it. Then to make a home in

Capernaum would have taken time—finding a room, settling into a new routine of market days and work-for-hire, Sabbath-keeping and socializing.

All the while, he was (I'm convinced) ruminating on John having been arrested.

You know the story, or maybe you do. John, the prophet and baptizer, known for his call to repentance (“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”), was Jesus’ cousin. Born of Elizabeth (and under miraculous circumstances), John was Jesus’ second cousin, for their mothers being first cousins.

And they were close, as least judging from the storied assertion that when Mary learned of her pregnancy—unexpected as it was, to say the least—she went to the home of her much older cousin Elizabeth. Perhaps she did this to share in the joy and audacity of their respective pregnancies. Or perhaps she did this that they might together learn what being an expectant mother, and then a new mother, might entail. Then there’s this sweet detail: that at Mary’s arrival at Elizabeth’s home, and Elizabeth’s greeting, Jesus is said to have leapt in Mary’s womb at the sound of Elizabeth’s voice.

Once born, and later as children, John and Jesus (we can only suspect, and I do imagine) continued to be close. After all, as men they were. John’s gospel has John the baptizer hollering enthusiastically as Jesus entered the scene (“Look! Here is the Lamb of God!”), and the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all have John humbled at being the one to baptize Jesus, when John thought it should be Jesus to do the baptizing.

Then there’s the fact that John’s arrest seems to have had an arresting affect on Jesus as well.

John was arrested for having condemned Herod’s marriage to Herodias as unlawful—which it was. Herodias had been Herod’s brother’s wife. But, since Herod possessed both the power to take her and the desire to have her, he did just that—a fact that John hardly ever let him forget. So Herod at last arrested John, and held him in the palace dungeon—nearby because it’s also said that Herod liked John, liked to listen to him talk, even though it’s this talk that made him intolerable to have out and about.

Did you get that? The wisdom and zeal that made John a dangerous citizen also made him an essential advisor. I think of the Jewish musicians who were enlisted to play for Nazi officers when those officers visited the camps. It must have been a strange and insufferable experience for John to be both prisoner and pet—which I imagine Jesus would have realized.

His withdrawal to Capernaum is by way of his contemplating such a thing, by way of his meditating on the task set before him. John's journey in the world would resemble Jesus' journey in the world—John just a few months ahead of Jesus, a few years head of Jesus, something Jesus surely recognized. John, as understood by Christian tradition, is the herald of Jesus, the way-maker for Jesus, something Jesus surely recognized. As goes John, there goes Jesus. And so, at John's arrest, Jesus is given pause.

Shall this be so? Would Jesus actually do this, go through with this?

In the wilderness—as told just prior to this, in the first eleven verses of this, the 4th chapter of Matthew—Jesus was tested by the spiritual powers that would work against him, the spiritual powers that work against all that feeds life and all who seek life in its truest manifestation.

Jesus emerged from this testing, emerged from the wilderness. He emerged having “passed” the test, but also to learn of John's arrest. So now, he was being tested by the political powers that would conspire to cow him as they do us all.

This time in Capernaum was perhaps for contemplating the question.

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From that time, Jesus began to proclaim what John had prior to now been proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”—is, of course, to say, “Expand your mind, enlarge your thinking, deepen and widen your imagination. Stretch your soul that it might approach the height and depth and breadth of God's soul.” Repent is *metanoia*, a transforming of knowing; to repent is to allow for the transforming of your mind and soul, your interiority and imagination; and to do this, or to have this done, is because the kingdom of heaven has come near, but if your mind and thinking and imagination remain limited by the dread and dreary ways of the world then you might miss it, you might be unable to perceive it or even conceive of it. The kingdom of heaven has come near, but without such repentance, without such a transformation of mind and imagination, you might miss it altogether.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

That it was Jesus now saying this—saying what John had so famously said, so persistently and *insistently* said; that it was Jesus now taking up that fierce mantle, should indicate to us that Jesus was saying, “Yes,” to being the “No” that John had been.

No, to the feckless power that was Herod’s to exercise.

No, to the ruthless calculation that would soon be Herodias’s to enjoy.

No, to the use of force that was Rome’s way of securing “peace”—state-sanctified violence as a guarantor against less predictable forms of violence. (*Pax Romana* indeed.)

No, to the use of the Law and the notion of justice by which the religious authorities’ maintained control.

No, to the question as to whether Jesus would tone it down, lower his expectations, and adjust accordingly his demands.

No; for instead he would embark upon his mission in the world and he would call disciples that they might further that mission abroad—beyond this region, beyond this nation and people, beyond this time and era, beyond, beyond.

No. At long last, no.

I spent the day in Boston yesterday, protesting with what’s been estimated at 125,000 others. I did this in the spirit of “No.” “No” to Mr. Trump’s agenda; “no” to his rhetoric; “no” to the way his mind apparently works; “no” to (what appears to me) his lack of grace and kindness, his lack of thoughtfulness and humility, his inability to reflect on himself and on history and to learn from it, his brute manner and deceptive (not to mention *self*-deceptive) posturing. The Women’s Marches have been characterized in all sorts of ways, described and understood as meaning all sorts of things. As demonstrations for women’s rights, for civil rights, for human rights, for climate justice, and because black lives matter: these are all fair and fine descriptions of what went on yesterday world-wide involving millions of people. But for me it comes down to a word: No.

I’m no naïf, and no blind idealist. I know that all sorts of nefarious things have happened under the auspices of all U.S. presidential administrations past. I know that under President Obama we as a society deported more people than ever before. I know we engaged in drone warfare to a grievous degree—and I admit to knowing shamefully little about that, perhaps because I don’t want to know. I know we as a country failed utterly to prevent what’s happened in Syria and Aleppo, which we might have done no matter who was in charge, it

being a situation that seems to defy resolution. I know America's moral failings are to be found under all presidential administrations, and are deep and tragic and shameful if also unavoidable.

What's more, I realize also that some administrations I give a "pass" to because they *seem* good, they *seem* to be well intended or at least well informed. I know I credit Barak Obama with a measure of good will that I do not credit to Donald Trump. I know I had more confidence in Mr. Obama's appointing of cabinet secretaries than I do Mr. Trump's. Perhaps that was misguided, though I do see a difference between these two leaders that is not just a difference in degree but a difference in kind.

All this said, then, I was perhaps wrong to have so comfortably rested assured by Mr. Obama's leadership. I will not be resting assured of Mr. Trump's. I will be resisting. I will be the "no" that Jack has taught me I can be. I will be the "no" that Jesus has taught us all to be. And *you* can rest assured, this is a "no" not of nihilism or cynicism or obstructionism. This is a "no" of setting limits, because there are very real limits regarding how best we can best live—we can *all* live; and to violate these limits (or to deny that they are there) is to commit also very real violence.

It seems what violence our country and culture commit is about violating limits; and it seems that this sort of reckless violence is made all the more possible with a leader like Mr. Trump.

So, no.

As to what this will actually look like, I don't know—except to say that it is my deepest hope to model myself after Jesus, to be in the mode that is gracious, courageous, and most of all cruciform, in the form of the cross of self-giving love. Resolute in the face of intimidation, hope in the face of defeat, steadfastness when resentment is so great a temptation, resistance when what's asserted as defining us as a society doesn't define me and doesn't define what I would have us be: no, a holy no.

But now that I spell all this out, I realize this isn't so different than what my task was last week, or last month, or last year; what *our* task, as followers of Christ, was last year, or last decade, or last century. What's more, I sense energy there, spirit; and I pray that it's the Holy Spirit. To feel ourselves in resistance to what our culture and context would have us conform to, to withstand the pressure of being pulled into something that violates our norms

and forms as Christians, we (as the psalmist said) are to lift our heads above the enemy forces and pressures of the day, so to seek God's face.

The Church is a gathering in resistance; and there is, as ever, much to resist. But I've long thought that the worst hell on earth would be to be useless, of no good use to anyone or anything. So there's good news in that we who love Christ are as crucial now as ever we've been.

Thanks be to God.