

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.28.24

John 6:1-21

After this, Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. (414)

There is no temptation story in the Gospel of John. You know the one. Foundational in the other three gospels, the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the temptation of Jesus follows his baptism.

This was when the Holy Spirit came down. His cousin John, at the River Jordan, baptized Jesus, and then Jesus came up out of the water and the Holy Spirit came down and alighted on like a bird, a dove maybe. Then also a voice spoke, "This is my Son, the Beloved; *you* are my Son, the beloved. With him, with *you*, I am well pleased."

And then the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, the divisive one, by Satan, the accuser.

It's thought this was to test Jesus. It needed to be known what he would *do* with this power, whether he'd be worthy of being or becoming the anointed one of God.

Matthew and Luke even got into specifics, how that temptation manifest, in three exchanges.

First was the temptation that Jesus turn stones to bread—and, hungry as he likely was in the wilderness, the advantage of doing so wouldn't be personal nearly as much as it would be political. Turning stones to bread in the wilderness could make it so Jesus wasn't personally hungry anymore. But it was much more potent in making it so no one might go hungry anymore—and this was to have access to political power of the sort kings and emperors and tyrants have always sought. If you have food for the people, you and you alone, you've made slaves of the people, desperate to serve you so they can get what they need. Even better, if you've got food for *some* of the people, then you've divided the people, which makes them even easier to conquer.

Anyone seeking political power would jump at this chance.

But no, Jesus would leave those stones as stones.

Second was the temptation to throw himself from the highest of heights and have it so angels carried him back safely to the ground. A spectacle: nothing captures people in a thrall quite like a spectacle of risk and special rescue.

Anyone seeking political power would jump at this chance, to take on so daring a risk and to be graced with spectacular rescue.

But no, Jesus would keep his feet on the ground.

Third was simply to kneel before Satan, to kneel before the devil, to kneel before the usual powers at play in politics: division, accusation. The devil, that divisive one; the Satan, that accuser and adversary: bow before this one, do this one's bidding on this one's terms, and you'll join the roster of rulers throughout all time. That's really how it's done.

But no, Jesus wouldn't divide, wouldn't accuse, wouldn't gather power by establishing the right enemy or striking upon the right scapegoat.

There's no temptation story in the Gospel of John, no one but this one.

Feeding a crowd in the wilderness of meager provisions is another common story in the synoptic gospels, all remembering around 5,000 people fed to satisfaction of five loaves of bread and two fish. Only this one remembers the response of the people, that they were going to come and take Jesus by force to make him king.

It's interesting to me that the synoptic gospels imagine the temptation to worldly power as coming from a supernatural force. Whether called the devil or called Satan, the one imagined to tempt Jesus was someone or something other than fully human. Here, though, in the Gospel of John, the temptation that Jesus would wield worldly power comes from people, normal people.

It calls to mind the story from much longer ago, when the people Israel insisted upon a king. They'd made it through the wilderness, they'd made it through the loss of Moses, the rise of Aaron, the time of judges when the Lord their God was their King, the Torah given by God was their Law, judges were the ones who mediated conflict whenever it arose among the people, and prophets worked to hold the vision of what the people were to be in the world and why. But then the people began to clamor for a king. They wanted to be like other nations, with a real, live king, with power not so sloppily spread across these teams of people but consolidated on one person, preferably a tough person, someone proven in battle, someone who could get people to follow his command. They didn't want the Lord their God to be their king. They wanted a person. They wanted a man.

They would bother the prophet Samuel about that, and Samuel would demur, would insist that the Lord their God was to be their king, not some person who would no doubt become corrupt by all that power. He even warned the people, "This is what a king is good for. He'll take your sons for his army and your daughters for his harem. He'll take your slaves to serve him and your livestock for his consumption." Samuel made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that a king costs at least as much as he benefits.

But, no, the people insisted. They wanted a king.

Samuel spoke to God about this, defended God that He should be their only and true king. But God said to go ahead, that the people were betraying God, not Samuel—that he should go ahead.

Saul was the first one anointed, but he didn't work out: not brutal enough, he would sometimes hold his sword rather than drive it home into the heart of his enemies. David came next, and ruled with courage, even ferocity. He's remembered as a hero. Plain as day. In fact, one preacher whose podcast I listen to spoke of once preaching on David, an event from the end of his life. The parishioner said after the service, "I remember when David was praised as a hero. I liked those days better." The event from David's life that's garnering a different perspective is the one we're always to hear in church coupled with this story of Jesus nearly taken by force to be king.

It was springtime, the time of year when kings go out to battle, which, funny that there's a season for that. David's army was on the field, and Uriah the Hittite was among them. But David wasn't with them. He was in Jerusalem, at his palace, on his couch, the story remembers, commanding his army from his couch.

And across the way he could see the rooftop of where Uriah lived when not out in battle. His beautiful wife Bathsheba was home on her own, and at the time when she'd finished menstruating and must bathe herself according to the Law, she went up to the roof top, where David spotted her and desired her and sent for her and raped her—as was his right to do. All within a king's realm is the king's to claim for his purposes, land, livestock, people.

Weeks later, when word came to him that she'd become pregnant, David sent for Uriah to return from battle that he might go home to his wife that her pregnancy might be thought his. But instead of going home, loyal soldier that he was, he slept in David's doorway, out of reverence for his king and respect for his brothers in arms still out in harm's way.

Several times David tried to persuade Uriah to go home, but he never did.

So, David sent him back to battle, ordered him to the front line, ordered the rest of the army to retreat, thus leaving Uriah exposed. He was killed there, and David took his wife to be his own, which is what a king will do given half the chance, what even a good and noble king will do given half the chance.

Character matters when it comes to who exercises power, whom we elect to exercise power. So does structuring things so to limit power that but one person might wield. Jesus' loathing to be endowed with kingly power is instructive, a deep if subtle caution. He would be king, but his throne wouldn't be his couch, it would be the cross.

This is the chief thing the Gospel of John was written to have us believe. It even says as much, at very nearly the end of the book: "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name," which to believe is to understand that God's nature is in self-giving love, that God's way in the world and in God's own reign is the way of sacrificial love, that God's exercising of power isn't ever to rely on violence but to take violence unto himself and transform into saving grace.

Prior to the writing of the Gospel of John, prior to the revelation that was the whole Christ event, the center of which are the cross and resurrection, much was ascribed to God that was violence. Winning in war was seen as God's acting. Vanquishing your enemies was seen as God's work in alliance with you.

But this was to interpret the events of history all wrong. This was to see God in the very things God was meaning to transform into joy and peace. When the people were coming to take Jesus by force and make him king, they were doing what they always do, what *we* always do: they were ascribing to God the ways humans wield power—through division and accusation, through

coercion and exploitation, through scapegoating and hero-making. And it would have been great for Jesus to become such a king; it would have been great for *Jesus* to become the king. It would have been far less good for us, for the world—because, were he to be such a comfortable and enriched king, he wouldn't be the Christ, he wouldn't be the anointed one of God, which, turns out, we *do* need a lot more than we need a king.

It matters the character of those whom we entrust with leadership, yet not because we're looking for a savior to hold public office but because our experience of salvation in the living of our days will be more true if we elect leaders who more resemble what Jesus who modeled, who seem more to be moved by the Holy Spirit and seem more capable of self-giving service.

It's been a turbulent election season so far. Keep your eye on the one whose steady presence embodies this reassurance, calling on God's name: "Do not be afraid. Keep heart. I am."

Thanks be to God.