



SEMINARY OF THE
SOUTHWEST

AN EPISCOPAL SEMINARY

Christ Chapel
The Very Rev. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge
July 8, 2018

I welcome you this morning to Christ Chapel where we are joined with those who witness at the detention center in Hutto, with those who walk with the bishops against gun violence, and those around the world who celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ this Sunday morning.

Seminary of the Southwest alumna, Bishop Dena Harrison is known for a quotation, she uses with clergy and those preparing for ordained ministry. She attributes it to Charlie Cook, retired professor of pastoral theology emeritus:

“If you wake up one Sunday morning feeling prophetic, you had better have your bags packed in the narthex”

It’s got a nice ring to it doesn’t it? One of those Panhandle proverbs a lot like that from our gospel reading today:

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, among their own kin, and in their own house.”

Jesus pronounces this proverb to the crowd in Nazareth, initially impressed by his teaching and his power, then suspicious, then dismissive.

Jesus quotes it right before he gives marching orders to the twelve disciples whom he invests with power to teach and to preach to exorcize and to heal like he does –

These two stopping places on the journey of Mark’s gospel are about faith and failure, setbacks and progress, death and life.

During this General Convention 2018 these gospel stories invite us to reflect– how is the Episcopal Church called to be prophetic – how are we to be faithful in the face of that terrible word “decline” - decentering disestablishment – how are we to preach the good news, while being overtaken by better marketed, better funded messaging about what is true - how to be human how to be a country and a human community?

Mark's gospel – Year B, my favorite gospel, not too much charm (Luke) zero sentimentality, almost too much realism, and paradox woven throughout it so tightly, cannot be unraveled by logic or explained to make sense.

Mark has showed Jesus as the paradigm of the powerful prophet – in the tradition of Moses, the lawgiver and worker of wonder, of Elijah, the one with the ratty wardrobe, who feeds widows and saves their children... Jesus the prophet who preaches repent and forgives sins and who speaks of the kingdom of God... he is mighty in word and deed, “What is this wisdom that is given to him!”

Jesus is rocking Galilee with deeds of power -- from the gentle lifting up of the mother by the hand – “and the fever left her” -- to most spectacular exorcism – that herd of possessed pigs running over the cliff into the sea –

In the country and by the sea in Galilee he's making the wounded whole and healing the sinsick soul. He is having stupendous success and arousing opposition, accused: “by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons!”

But here in his village, his hometown, they took offense, they stumbled, they were scandalized.

And he could do no deed of power there... and he was amazed at their unbelief, their a-faith, their *apistis*, their unfaith.

Why could he do no deed of power there?

Because nobody asked him, nobody begged him, nobody threw themselves at his feet and supplicated him.

We have seen faith, *pistis*, in the hard country of Galilee. And it's not what you believe but who do you trust and who you NEED.

Faith is the friends who dug through the roof to get their friend, who got access, who made a way to get him to Jesus ---

Faith is the father who begged him to come to his dying daughter, faith is the bleeder who fought her way through the crowd to touch his clothes – who made a way – “When he saw their faith,” “Do not fear only have faith,” “Daughter your faith has saved you, go in peace”

Faith is close to desperation. It's at the end of the line, the *eskatos* – the last chance. The people in Nazareth weren't desperate enough. They figured he couldn't be Elijah, or Moses, just a carpenter.

The people who have faith in the gospel of Mark do what Michael Curry entreated us to do at the opening Eucharist and last night at the revival – maybe it doesn't come easy for some of us -- to throw yourself into the arms of Jesus.

What if we in the Episcopal Church got desperate enough to gamble on Jesus? Then we would figure out a way, a way to get in, a way to get down. We would make a way where there is no way.

Maybe a time of political extremism will do it – it will make us desperate supplicants.

So in Nazareth nothing good happens – there's a standoff – they are scandalized and he is amazed at their unbelief – it's a bust. In my family we have an expression when there is a big disappointment; something goes really wrong, we say, "we've experienced a 'setback.'"

So Jesus just keeps going. He calls the Twelve, and tells them how they are to may their way into the countryside crowded with lame, blind, hungry, broken, yearning, sinning people and their families.

You see they will be prophets now too.

He gave them a buddy. He gave them power/authority/*exousia*.

He told them what they should pack.

I met a woman who told me that she was a member of the Texas Friends of the Camino, whose mission was supporting people – from Texas- who were making the pilgrimage across Spain, Camino de Santiago... I have never done this and have always been interested, so she gave me her card and said "call me."

"What kind of help do you give?" I asked.

"Well we give wisdom from all the other people who have traveled this road..."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Always wear two pairs of socks, a light one and a heavy one, and when they get wet be sure to take them off and let to let them dry completely."

Taking care of your feet. That was the main thing.

So I like it that Jesus recommends footwear for this journey - sandals -for when you have to walk out of Egypt –when you are making that way, crossing that sea, trekking through that wilderness.

And be sure to pack a staff - to lean on, to help you up the mountain and even more important when you are on the way down, usually even harder.

And don't worry about taking anything else, no extra clothes, nothing to check, nothing for the overhead rack, nothing to place completely under the seat in front of you.

No picnic basket for the wilderness either.

The prophets were supposed to pack only essential minimal prophet gear

And when you get rebuffed, not received, not welcomed, when you experience "a setback," don't freak out. Don't wake up feeling prophetic and expect to be invited to move in for good.

Shake off the dust from your feet as a witness against them. Notice this is a mild mannered prophetic performance, not turning over the tables in the temple or anything particularly dramatic, just a bit of brushing off the sandals and moving on.

And the story ends with the disciples' success, preaching repentance - casting out demons and anointing with oil and healing those who are sick. It looks like success, but in this most realistic gospel, it is setting up for other setbacks to come – when it will be the disciples themselves, the Twelve, who stumble, who repudiate their teacher, who are scandalized.

"The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." "All of them deserted him and fled."

The paradox of Mark's gospel is all built around the setback of "crucified, dead and buried."

If the Episcopal Church is to be a prophet, its honor will be highly contingent, super situational. Setbacks will not be exceptional.

The Episcopal Church's prophetic action might be dramatic, performative like the prophets, the vested bishops against gun violence processing in a downtown Austin park, the 700 convention goes on buses to pray at the detention center in Hutto.

(One of my friends at St. David's has quipped, "You now it's really bad when Episcopalians are marching!")

The prophetic action may also be steady patient persistent acts of faithfulness, brushing ourselves off, retying our sandals, and journeying on.

All the prophets called people back – back to the past – back to the covenant with God – back to the womb that bore them and the rock from which they were hewn. Jesus' "wisdom given to him" and his teaching is all about following the Torah, honor thy father and mother, care for the widow, remember what the Sabbath is for and keep it. The prophetic witness of the Episcopal Church is a calling back.

The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

Do you remember when these simple things were shared values? Held in common? Telling the truth, concern for the common good, care for your neighbor, courtesy, moderation?

The prophetic Episcopal Church can call us back to these things which sound radical now, which are disrespected, mocked, not honored. All the prophets called us to God’s future when “the eyes of blind with be opened ears of the deaf unstopped, lame will leap like a young deer and the tongue of the voiceless sing for joy” a mighty advent, salvation coming, kingdom of God, and the restoring of the world.

The Episcopal Church calls us to resurrection faith.

Out style of travel like the wilderness wanderers, with faith in God and minimal gear, sandals and staff, and the presence of God Be thou still my strength and shield.

At the heart of the gospel of Mark is the paradox, stubborn paradox, that it is not the twelve disciples who are the heroes of faith, but those whose friends are paralyzed, whose children are at the point of death, who are bleeding out.

Might we as the Episcopal Church be desperate enough to have faith?

Might it be the bleeders, the dreamers, the blind beggars, those whose lives do matter, those who cannot find their children, those who suffer as Jesus the utterly forsaken one, who embody resurrection faith, who will be our leaders in this barren land?

In desperate times, times of suffering, and setback, in the spirit of the prophets, let us pray for memory and speech to call the people of God back to God, for vision to call into the future, let us pray for resurrection faith through Christ Jesus, wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Amen.