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Church of the Holy Faith
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 11
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Eph 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34; 53-56
July 21, 2024

Urgency. Hope. Compassion.

We all, at one time or another, have experienced urgency in a situation. Hiking in the mountains when a sudden lightning storm comes and there's an urgent need to get to safety. Rushing through an airport to urgently make a connection when the first flight was delayed. Finishing a work project to meet deadline after an unexpected computer crash. Driving through the night to reach the bedside of a loved one before she dies.

You may have noticed today's gospel seems a little disjointed. Our reading starts with verses thirty to thirty-four and then skips all the way to verses fifty-three to fifty-six. This combination of two short, summary-style paragraphs highlights a different urgency: the urgency surrounding Jesus and his ministry throughout Mark's gospel. The passages emphasize the immediacy of the gospel message, Jesus' growing popularity in the communities around the Sea of Galilee – and his growing threat to the status quo.

In the first scenario, the twelve disciples have just returned from the mission Jesus sent them on – two by two they journeyed with no bread, no bag, and no money to proclaim repentance, cast out demons, and cure the sick. They return both exhausted and exhilarated. The effect of their witness, coupled with Jesus' miraculous healings in the region, however, has whipped the locals into a frenzy. So many are coming and going that Jesus and his disciples don't even have time to eat. When Jesus suggests they retreat by boat to a deserted place, the crowd outsmarts them. The Sea of Galilee is not that all that large. By climbing one of the surrounding hillsides, you can

look over a good portion of the lake and track the passage of nearby vessels, and I imagine this is exactly what the intrepid Jesus- followers did. Pinpointing the likely mooring location of the boat, the swelling crowd rushes by foot and arrives ahead of Jesus. Now let's just pause for a moment and reflect on the urgency of this scene. These folks are not Taylor Swift fans urgently trying to get concert tickets. You all do know who Taylor Swift is, right? These aren't even people who are simply curious about Jesus and who think it might be worthwhile to spend a few hours following him. These people have no leisure time. They are impoverished and oppressed. To drop everything and rush to the far side of the Lake of Galilee means their crops will be left untilled, their bread will remain unbaked, their livestock will be at risk for theft, and their merchandise will remain unsold. These are people who are vulnerable and desperate for Jesus' words, his healing, and his solace. These are people of hope.

The urgency of this scene is compounded in the next. Having lost the opportunity for rest, Jesus faces a crush of humanity whenever he goes. The sick are taken from their homes and laid on mats in the marketplace. People press in on all sides, frantic to touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Nothing in Mark's gospel suggests Jesus experiences frustration with the masses and their chaotic persistence. Instead, Mark comments, "he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The word choice and metaphor are intentional. Compassion means "to suffer together." It means to empathize with someone who is suffering AND to feel compelled to reduce that suffering. Significantly, though, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, compassion is one of the major attributes of God. "For the LORD will vindicate

his people and have compassion on his servants,”¹ the psalmist wrote. In the historical books and the words of the prophets, God’s compassion is repeatedly proclaimed, deeply connected to acts of mercy and forgiveness.

The reference to a “sheep without a shepherd” also has a direct Old Testament connection. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” God warned the leaders of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. In America, shepherding resembles ranching: sheep are left to graze in vast fenced pastures. You’ll never see this fencing in the Middle East. Grazing sheep scatter without a shepherd and run when they sense danger; their only hope for protection comes from the shepherd. The leaders of Israel and the occupying Roman forces have abandoned God’s people. These supposed “shepherds” have discarded, plundered, and denied them dignity. With Jesus they experience the opposite. In Jesus they find the good shepherd, the one whose compassion revives their souls and guides them along right pathways.

Urgency. Hope. Compassion. Hoping in God, hoping in Jesus is to trust the faithfulness of his compassion. In today’s gospel, Jesus embodies God’s compassion, a compassion that soon will be vividly displayed on the cross and exposed in the resurrection. The resurrection boldly proclaims that in God we find a compassion resilient enough to bring healing and forgiveness not just once, but again and again for all eternity. But here’s the question: Do we pursue hope and faith in God’s compassion with any sense of urgency? Are we a people of hope? Our society is saturated with a false sense of urgency for just about everything else. Only two hours left to buy all the things that I never knew I needed. An “urgent” letter that turns out to be the same one I received a month ago. Urgent emails, urgent text messages, urgent commutes, urgent responses,

¹ Ps 135:14

urgent milestones for our kids. Creating a sense of urgency is actually a psychological marketing technique designed to stimulate anxiety and adrenaline that is only calmed when the “urgent” action is taken. And then the cycle repeats. What if, instead, we chased after Jesus with the same urgency of the first century Galileans, eager for his words and his healing touch, confident of his love and compassion? What if we were willing to risk setting aside our twenty-first century metaphorical plows and bread bowls – even for a moment - and race to places unknown to meet him? What if the first thing we thought of upon waking was to wonder where we might be able to find Jesus – and then do everything possible to just touch the fringe of his cloak? What might that look like for you, for our church, for our world? The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. Amen.