

SERMON- Proper 9 (B)
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~~Ezekiel 2:1-5~~

~~Psalm 123~~——

Good Shepherd
July 4, 2021

Mark 6:1-13

OPENING:

Imagine this scenario:

- 1) Churches have closed for months at a time.
- 2) The government and those churches clash over whether they should be allowed to hold services.
- 3) And, simultaneous to all that, political unrest sweeps through the land with violence and disturbance erupting on the streets on a daily basis.

Can you imagine?

Of course you can. We just lived through it.

But I am not referring to 2020, I am referring instead to 1776 and the experience of the United States and the Episcopal Church 245 years ago.

(You should know by now that it does not take the July 4th holiday for me to try to turn a sermon into history lesson. But history is just so darn instructive.)

Historians refer to this period as an “identity crisis” for the Episcopal Church, as a time of “suspended animation” for a group in transition.¹

Does that not sound a little bit like today’s circumstances as we try to figure out as a Church, and as a country, who we are and what to do “after”?

Back then, it was not a pandemic, of course, that kept the churches closed and faith life in flux, but the experience of the American Revolution.

That’s because during the war, some church structures had been destroyed by conflict going on in their midst.

Other Episcopal churches simply stopped having services because they could not use the prayer book pledging loyalty to the British King and the Parliament. Meanwhile, some clergy took it on themselves to have church anyway, with one minister proclaiming that he would rather have his tongue cut out than to stop.²

¹ Bond, Edward L., and Joan R. Gundersen. 2007. *The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607-2007*. Richmond, VA: Virginia Historical Society, 207; Charles Tiffany quoted in Mills, Frederick V. 1977. “Protestant Episcopal Churches in the United States 1783-1789: Suspended Animation or Remarkable Recovery?” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 46 (2): 152n3.

² Hein, David, and Gardiner H. Shattuck. 2004. *The Episcopalians*. New York: Church Publishing, 39.

JULY 4th:

Recalling that history is, at the very least, a helpful reminder, in these hyper-political times, that things were always political, the Church never existed completely outside of what was going on around it.

The Episcopal Church was born out of the unique experience of the nation's founding.

The trite and cliché version of that history is that the Founding Fathers, after they were finished with the government documents, simply walked across the street in Philadelphia and created the Episcopal Church.

The reality of that moment, and those since then, are much messier, of course.

But, since today is July 4th

and it's also our Parish Picnic

and our 1st time with sacramental communion in 16 months,

there is this sense of homecoming and celebration, and trying to get back to the source.

That is, "We made it" ... it's beginning to feel like we are home after a long and difficult journey..... that we should feel some "CONGRATULATIONS!"

But if only it were so easy, as Jesus found out in our Gospel.

He found, in his experience of coming home, that returning to the source, to where he had grown up, can be uncomfortable for all involved.

The good news is that that experience might be helpful for us as we wrestle with that question of how **we** might respond to this homecoming, to the idea of July 4th, and to a church emerging a traumatic event?

GOSPEL:

To that question, Jesus actually gives us marching orders, fairly explicit instructions. He had gone back to his hometown and instead of getting applause and support, he got ridiculed. But he does not wallow, but he gets to work.

This is what Jesus said we should do.:

1) "Don't go it alone."

Travel two by two. If it's good enough for the animals and Noah's ark. It's good enough for you. Find a friend, do the work in community.

A part of our history, unfortunately, has been elevating the individual to a special status. But even Jesus kept close friends and suggests we do the same.

2) Second: “Travel light.”

He said it’s okay to feel unequipped. And the focus is not how pathetic and destitute you can look. It’s more about not bringing your baggage from the past with you and the accompanying recognition that, again, you will need to rely on others.³

3) Finally, Jesus says “don’t be bashful.”

So, don’t hold back, instead dream big even when the chips are down.

The irony is always that Jesus empowers his bonehead disciples, us, to do way more than he could.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Good advice for us now, good advice for our ancestors 245 years ago.

One option—which Jesus does not give—was/is to flee.

Apparently, back in the 1770s, a large portion of Episcopalians left the colonies during the American Revolution and went to the place that Americans go a lot of times when things aren’t going the way they want.

They went to Canada.

Thus, a huge population of Loyalists settled in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, not wanting to mess with the new country or the new religious expression.⁴

Some stayed, of course, but, by 1789, there were only 10,000 Episcopalians in the early United States, out of a population of 4 million.

That might have been the low point for the denomination in the US:

no governmental support,

a lingering association with the colonial power that had just been thrown off,

no bishops,

large numbers of clergy that had left,

buildings destroyed,

and they could not even use the prayer book.⁵ All these elements meant rock bottom for the church with red doors.

Now I know that today it’s hard to get people to feel sorry for the Episcopal Church, because, generally-speaking, we need to do a better job examining the more difficult parts of history rather than getting too triumphant and celebratory.

³ Myers, Ched. 1988. *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis., 213

⁴ Mills, 161.

⁵ Holmes, David L. 1993. *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity. 59.

CONCLUSION

But, again, 245 years ago, the Church was hard up, faced all those problems. But it heard Jesus' marching orders and realized that knowing our history means that we know what it's like to die and come back to life.

It could get off the ground because it had these images of rebirth, of being born again from Scripture.

It could do the impossible because it had as its history's defining hinge point, Jesus' death on the cross, and the knowledge that the seeds of the Cross bore as its fruit the disciples and the Church.

So the ruin of the American Revolution merely ended up leading to the remarkable revival and growth that brought about the national church, and this Diocese, and even this church.

Now remembering Scripture is great, and knowing history is good too, but we have seen this pattern happen with our own lives, with COVID.

We have watched something that seems to be gone, that seems to be missing, be transformed and translated, glorified as "behold, Christ makes all things new."

What will the additional fruits COVID bring forth?

What seeds are growing as we live and breathe at this moment?

What has had to die to be reborn again?

Who knows?

That history is left to be written.

We live into the paradox of a history
that is flawed and with much to atone for her—
but also one that reteaches us that great lesson:
that the Episcopal Church was the "greatest casualty of the American Revolution"⁶
but that God knows something about
darkness into light
suffering into joy,
turning death into life,

AMEN

⁶ Quoted in Mills, 152.