

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 3, 2017

Jeremiah 15:15-21 • Psalm 26:1-8 • Romans 12:9-21 • Matthew 16:21-28

To borrow a line from Cool Hand Luke, it appears what Jesus and the disciples have here is a failure to communicate. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus asked Peter a question. "Who do you say that I am?" What did Peter make of him? What did Peter think about him? And Peter replied that Jesus is the messiah. Good answer. Jesus calls Peter blessed and gives him the keys to the kingdom. Everything's going great. The disciples are on board. Jesus is in a good mood. Fast forward to the end of today's gospel reading, just thirty seconds later, and Jesus is comparing Peter to Satan and telling him to get out of the way. Peter just called Jesus the messiah, so what exactly is the problem?

For us, living two thousand years after the events the gospels report, the word messiah refers to Jesus. Jesus is the messiah, the messiah is Jesus. Simple. This is the way we use most of our titles or names for Jesus. We use Lord, Son of Man, Son of God, Christ, Messiah, Emmanuel, etc. etc. interchangeably, like different nicknames. Call Jesus the messiah or Christ or King of Kings or whatever else you want, and it's fine because we all know that we're talking about Jesus. Not so for these disciples two thousand years ago. In Hebrew, the word messiah literally means "anointed." It's a word that was first used to describe people in the Old Testament who have been chosen by God and set apart from the people for a specific job or responsibility. Priests, prophets, and kings as messiahs at various points. And since a messiah is someone chosen by God for a task, you could have more than one messiah. Calling someone anointed is like saying someone is "blessed" or "called."

But that changes over time. The way the word is used starts to narrow. Eventually, the word messiah comes to refer primarily to kings like King David. And by the time Jesus is around, the word comes to refer to a future king or ruler. Instead of talking about a messiah, there is a hope and a desire for the messiah. The one singular person who is anointed by God to bring justice and peace into the land. The one who will restore Israel to its rightful place, no longer under the boot of the Roman Empire. The messiah doesn't have to be divine, but they need to be powerful enough to restore Israel's former glory.

If you're a disciple like Peter, and Jesus tells you that he's the messiah, your reaction is *This is awesome. This is the guy we've been waiting for. This is the one who is going to make Israel great.* And when Jesus says that you're all going to go to Jerusalem, you think *Yes! What a time to be alive. This is history in the making. We'll be victorious over the empire thanks to the messiah, the new king Jesus.*

Except that's not what Jesus says. While Peter is daydreaming up visions of Jesus conquering Jerusalem, Jesus is still talking. Jesus says that when they get to Jerusalem, he will undergo great suffering, be killed, and on the third day be raised. You can hear a record scratch in the background as the disciples freeze. "No, no, no, no," you can imagine Peter saying. That's not what the messiah does. The messiah is the king, the anointed of God. "God forbid that this should happen to you," Peter protests. If you're the messiah, you can't go into Jerusalem and get killed. The messiah is supposed to be like King David, who shows up with a slingshot and kills the enemy. Why go to Jerusalem if it's just going to get you killed?

The problem, the failure to communicate, is that Jesus and Peter are talking about different kinds of messiahs. Remember the setting for today's story, Caesarea Philippi. I'm going to spare you the travelogue I gave you last week. But Caesarea Philippi is a city that sees ultimate power and ultimate authority in its namesake, the emperor Caesar Augustus. The power that the empire uses is

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

coercive. It's vengeful. It intimidates. It sees other people either as threats to its claims on power or as expendable resources it can use to intimidate others.

When Peter calls Jesus the messiah, this is the kind of power he thinks Jesus has. He thinks of the powers of the world. That Jesus will triumph over the evils of the empire by being stronger than his opponents. By overwhelming them with force. That Jesus will redeem Israel by leading a rebellion. That when the kingdom of Caesar Augustus is displaced, the kingdom of heaven will be set up in its place.

That's the kind of messiah many Jews like the disciples expected. The kind of messiah they wanted. The kind of messiah who gets revenge for all the abuses you had to put up with. A messiah who embodies what we would call the politics of "backlash." When the Romans will get what they had coming to them. Someone who will redeem Israel by overwhelming force. Just take over Jerusalem and worry about morals later.

This past week, the New York Times ran a story about a guy in Fort Smith, Arkansas named Abraham Davis. Fort Smith is a complicated city. On the one hand, it has all the marks of a hollowed out manufacturing town. The abandoned factories. The opioids. Until recently, the high school mascot was Johnny Rebel. But Fort Smith also has a lower unemployment rate than the national average. It has two country clubs. It has a growing population with burgeoning education and health care industries. And it's surprisingly diverse. And as it just so happens, many of those high-paying jobs that let you buy the homes on the nice side of town are held by Muslim immigrants.

And so one night last October, Abraham Davis, who is in his early twenties, and his friends were sitting around drinking cheap whiskey. And the conversation eventually turned to ISIS and the Muslims in their town. And Abraham believed, rightly, that what ISIS was doing abroad was abhorrent. And he also believed, wrongly, that the Muslims who lived in Fort Smith, many of whom are from Morocco, had some responsibility for what was happening in Iraq and Syria. And Davis was so angered by the hatred he imagined his Muslim neighbors were responsible for that he and his friends went to the two mosques in town with some spray paint. And they tagged them with a bunch of Swastikas. "Go Home" on the front door. "We Don't Want You Here U.S.A." And an assortment of insults about Islam and Allah.

And, unfortunately, since many mosques and temples are now expecting this kind of thing, they had security cameras outside. And eventually the police identified Davis and took him into custody. And as he was sitting in this cell, he had a revelation of sorts, a kind of Road to Damascus experience. When he thought about all the people who went to this mosque, Davis started to feel a sense of horror over what he had done. And then he started to get worried that his Muslim neighbors would judge their Christian neighbors like him based on their worst examples. They would assume all the white people in town were as backwards and prejudiced as him. This, of course, is exactly what his Muslim neighbors had been dealing with for years. As Davis put it, he realized that he "was the monster that he'd always fought against." That his hate had so overpowered his view of the world, that he became totally blind to it. And it wasn't until he was sitting in a cell that he realized how corrosive that hatred was. How he had turned into the very thing he hated.

That realization that Davis had is why Jesus spoke so harshly to Peter. Because Jesus knew that Peter's desire for a powerful messiah was dangerous. When Peter suggests that Jesus should use a kind of worldly power, Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan." Don't tempt me. Don't try to convince me to fight fire with fire. Because if you try to defeat Caesar Augustus by becoming Caesar

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Augustus, and you'll harm a bunch of innocent people in the process, and you'll end up losing your soul. You'll become the very thing you hate.

Because the power that Jesus embodies is something else. It's a power that doesn't use the methods and ways of the world to achieve justice. It's a power that doesn't set up the kingdom of God as a new regime or a new occupier. The power Jesus has isn't a power over other people but the power to subvert oppression and injustice by entering into solidarity with all of us. Even to the point of dying on a cross, next to the thousands of other victims of injustice. It's a kind of power that props itself up not by intimidating people with death, but by overcoming death with life. Or, as St. Paul puts it, by overcoming evil with good.

And, most surprising, it's a kind of power that is open to us. Peter's vision of the messiah is someone who leads you into Jerusalem, takes power, and does all of the hard work for you. A superhero. For Peter, the really hard stuff is going to be a spectator sport. But Jesus tells his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me." Take up their cross. Jesus invites them and all of us to take part in his new kind of power. To take part not by taking up arms or taking up their weapons but by taking up their cross. To take on the suffering of the world. That by doing what Jesus has been doing. That by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, ministering to people in need, they are embodying and using Jesus's power.

In that *Times* story, there are a group of people who use that kind of power that Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading. The power you get from taking up your cross. It's the members of those mosques who got together and tried to figure out whether or how they could forgive Davis. And eventually they decided that they could and lobbied the prosecutors that he not be charged with a felony. As Dr. Nasri, a leader at the mosque put it, "We did not want this to destroy his life." That they wanted to create a more just, inclusive community. And they realized the way to do that was not by pushing Davis out of their community but by helping him become a part of it.

To be clear, this isn't a fairy tale. There are still restraining orders in place. There's still tension in the community. But there is the possibility that even if Davis's actions can't be erased, they can be redeemed. That's the kind of power Jesus is talking about.

Jesus isn't the kind of messiah we want. Certainly not the kind Peter wanted. Because instead of getting rid of people we don't like, merely pushing them out of the way, Jesus insists on bringing them in. And more than that, giving us the power to do the same. The power to "not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

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