



## *“Safe Haven”*

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34

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**July 19, 2009**

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

It's July and, for many of us, that means vacation time. After months of anticipation, it's time to get away from our busy lives, the pressure of work, and the heat and noise of the city.

Life has a way of wearing us down and wearing us out. Work and responsibility are wonderful gifts and good for us, but we need to get away in order to rest, relax and refresh our minds, bodies and souls.

One year when the pressure was particularly intense, we vacationed in San Clemente, California. We borrowed a large RV, rented a campsite a few yards from the bluffs that overlook the Pacific Ocean, and decompressed. Our children, along with one of their cousins, played in the park and trekked down the hills to the sea. Gloria and I relaxed and read under a tree or sat in patio chairs on the bluffs and stared at the ocean. It was good to get away. Life slowed down, responsibilities were two thousand miles to the east, and our souls were restored.

One day we sat on the bluffs under the expanse of crystal blue sky and looked out at the ocean for a long time. I recall saying – in the words of a commercial of the time, “It doesn't get any better than this.” I suppose part of what made the moment extraordinary was the knowledge that in a few days, we'd be back to the pressures and responsibilities of the ordinary.

We need to get away from it all. Apparently Jesus needed to get away from life, too. Our Gospel Lesson begins with Jesus and his disciples getting ready for a week at the beach. They'd all been very busy and the pressure was increasing.

In Nazareth in his hometown synagogue, Jesus presented himself and his mission to cheers from some, then rejection by most. Instead of open arms of welcome like you might expect for an obviously gifted hometown boy, fists were clenched in anger and arms folded against him.

He'd moved on to Capernaum where the reception was much warmer. He was an immediate success. Large crowds came to hear him and, by all accounts, the power of God was with him. It seemed as if what he said was true, God was establishing something new and revolutionary on earth.

But success has its consequences. For one, the press of the crowd was constant. There was never enough time. Often, Mark says, he didn't take time to eat. People's expectations soared, a very real form of pressure and responsibility.

Great success always gives birth to criticism, jealousy and opposition. Critics accompanied Jesus, trying to catch him in a word. Members of his family, including his own mother,

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thought he was mad and tried to restrain him. Friends and foes misunderstood what he did and what he said. Success had its downside – and it was a unique and unrelenting pressure.

Then Jesus heard alarming news about his cousin, the prophet John the Baptist, the one who baptized him. John's message was the same as Jesus': God's reign is here. It seems that John directed a sermon at King Herod in which he condemned the king. Herod ordered John's arrest and later executed him.

Jesus must have seen John's martyrdom as a sign of his own. He began to prepare his disciples to take over his ministry. He sent them out equipped with his message and his authority. It worked! The power of God was with them too. They experienced Jesus' success and met equal opposition.

When they reported back to Jesus, they were thrilled. It is exhilarating to experience the kingdom of God in action.

Several years ago, one of our confirmation girls dropped out of the program and dropped out of church. She was determined to be a prodigal daughter, and she succeeded beyond her wishes.

Ten years later, she came to see our youth pastor. She wanted God back in her life and asked if we would complete her confirmation. The youth pastor mentored her for a time, and we set a date on a Sunday morning for her confirmation. She stood in front of the congregation and told her sad story and asked if we would take her back. I anointed her with oil, blessed her, and we welcomed her home. Few eyes were dry and every heart soared. We witnessed the redemptive power of God on earth.

Jesus' disciples, exhilarated by success, also suffered the consequence of success. They were weary.

Jesus suggested they all go off to a quiet place to rest and relax. He booked passage on a boat, and they sailed off to the wilderness.

Here the story takes a dramatic turn. Some of Jesus' fans got wind of his escape. They took off on foot to see if they could arrive first. Apparently, the boat was a slow boat and the crowd arrived first. They were waiting on the dock when the boat landed.

I can imagine a disciple or two muttering under his breath, "Oh man, so much for a quiet getaway!"

But if they looked again, or looked more closely, they would have seen something more. Like any gathering of human beings, this crowd was filled with every human need.

In her bestselling novel, *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson writes in the voice of an old minister, John Ames, who muses, "There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't expect to find it either."

I learned that one Sunday morning years ago when I looked out over my congregation during the offertory. I'd been there long enough to learn some of what lies beneath the surface. That morning I saw more than the eye normally sees. Down near the front on the right side was Terri, a fifteen-year-old high school girl who was pregnant. Only her foster mother, her social worker and I knew. There's often more than meets the eye. Behind them sat a dear older woman who'd just discovered that the light of her life, her very successful son, a prominent minister, had left his wife for a woman in the church. Beside me, on the organ bench sat Marjorie, who'd was recovering from a double mastectomy and courageously, and with some difficulty, continued her work in worship. On the left in the back sat a man and wife recovering from his fling with a woman in the

congregation who sat opposite them with her husband, still fuming at her betrayal and his public embarrassment. Toward the front was the school superintendent, a single parent struggling to raise three boys on his own. Quietly, as always, Nam Sun sat up front. She was a Korean woman who'd married an American soldier and moved to small town America. He was a cruel man and, I suspect, he abused her. She came every week, said little, and went back to what passed as a home.

As I looked out I was overwhelmed. The pastoral prayer came next in the service. What could I possibly say? There certainly is "a lot under the surface of life...."

Jesus looked at the crowd with compassion. He turned to his disciples and said, "They are like sheep without a shepherd." And he began to teach them about life and about faith.

No one cared for their lives, their souls, their concerns, wounds and crises. Those appointed to care for the people didn't care. The Romans who ran the country certainly didn't care. The Jerusalem establishment charged with civic affairs in the land cared more about keeping the Romans pacified and keeping their offices safe than they cared for the needs of the people. Most of the clergy, caught up in rules, regulations, traditions, and the details of religious life served the religious system more than they served the needs of the people entrusted to their care.

It's not supposed to be that way, but it usually is – then and now. In fact, in the life of the people of Israel, the leaders of the land were called shepherds, and the care and welfare of all the people in every aspect of life was their responsibility.

Psalm 72 sums up the shepherd role of the king beautifully:

May [the king] judge your people with righteousness  
and your poor with justice....

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the children of the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.

For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight.

Sadly, most kings failed in this one great task assigned them. The prophet Jeremiah declares, "You [kings] fail to execute justice and you don't deliver victims of robbery from the hand of the oppressor. You do not judge the cause of the poor and needy; you profit from dishonest gain and you shed innocent blood and practice violence."

Jesus, the Good Shepherd promised by God, looked at the crowd with compassion and began to teach them about life and faith. Then he fed them, healed them, and sent them home assured that their welfare is the center of God's concern. They went home fed, healed, and loved.

Again, Marilynne Robinson, speaking through John Ames, writes, "Love is holy because it is like grace. The worthiness of the object is never what really matters." His father and his grandfather taught him that an encounter with any person is a moment to ask, "What is the Lord asking of me at this moment? And each such occasion...in some small way participates in the grace that saved me."

In a world like ours – and not much has changed since Jeremiah's day – there are too few safe places, too little compassion.

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But there is a place in this world that has a heart. This room is a symbol of that safe haven for the soul. It's different in here. It looks and feels different. It's quiet, peaceful, spiritual, and has a unique form of beauty. What we do in here is also different. Each week we gather here to find rest for our weary souls, to have our minds and souls shaped by God's presence and word, and we find that holy love of God in each other's faces, gestures and words.

Bound to God and to each other by covenant, we are on a journey together, nourished by word, sacrament and spirit, supported by relationships that transcend the ordinary; we are a place of safety for children and adults, a place where families are honored, and where no one gets a break because of their position or their wealth. And we leave here – at least most of the time – fed, healed, and loved.

Many of you remember Steve Belden and Forbes Hill. Both were longtime members of Plymouth recently passed into eternity. They were polar opposites bound together in a marvelous friendship. Steve was unique. He was a simple man with large needs. He was chronically ill and in and out of the hospital whether he needed it or not. He kept many of us fully informed of his ills and travails. In his politics, Steve was very conservative.

Forbes was a sophisticated man of great learning. He was a university professor and one of the leading theorists in his field. As they say, he wrote the book. Even at the end of his days and very sick, Forbes never complained and always had a good word to say to all. In his politics, Forbes was very liberal. He marched for civil rights before it was popular. He was a union organizer. Earlier in life and until the end, Forbes was a community activist.

And Forbes cared for Steve. He was a friend who provided transportation, gave advice, and became the executor of Steve's estate. Forbes made sure Steve got to church and home again. He listened to Steve's complaints and his politics with great patience. Twice when I visited Steve in the hospital, Forbes was there tending to his friend. At Steve's funeral, Forbes offered a brilliant and poignant tribute to his friend.

There is a place in this world that cares, that has a heart, that tends the soul and shapes the mind. We are that safe haven.

Amen.

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