



## **Pentecost 21 – Proper 23 (B)**

### **Getting Started**

**[RCL]: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31**

*Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.*

It is no great revelation to say that we live in an age of manifold crises. Crises of earth and society and spirit, each one intertwined and evolving, inviting us into postures of denial or determination depending on the day and, perhaps, whether we've had our morning coffee.

One might think that the odd collision of banal and existential concerns is unique to our time. How can one grocery shop while glaciers melt? How can one pick out a wedding dress while wars rage on and on? How can one browse Netflix while people fall asleep out on the streets? It is enough to break the attentive heart in two.

But we would be forgetful indeed to think that the task before us—to live and to bear the weight of living—is a new one. Our crises may be particular, and even particularly dire, but we shouldn't fall prey to the pridefulness of assuming they are entirely unique. It may feel new to us—the present always does—but God has seen it all before. Just open the Bible and you will find the record of it.

This is the strange, bracing comfort offered in the message of the prophets in Holy Scripture. We may not think of their words as comforting, but in their own peculiar way, they are.

Amos, in today's first reading, unfurls a list of offenses that sounds bracingly familiar: affliction of the righteous, abhorrence of the truth, pushing aside the needy at the gate. Even if we have not done all of these things ourselves, we have seen it done, we know it, we understand it. The sins of our ancestors are not a foreign language to us. And it is a sort of comfort to read this, not because it is good or desirable to repeat their mistakes, but because we come to understand that God is not and cannot be surprised by anything that we do. God is not daunted by our sins in the same way that we are. His attentive heart might be broken in two, but he is not defeated by it.

The prophets, like Amos, call us to a new way of being and living precisely because God knows, without any doubt, that this other way is possible for us, despite our histories of failure. When Amos says, “Seek good and not evil... establish justice in the gate,” the prophet is saying, “Yes, this option is actually available to you, and it always will be.”

The greatest mistake we can make is to believe that our crises, whatever they are, are definitive, immutable, immovable. Because only God is those things. So do not make an idol of your despair. Let your heart break open to the possibility of transformation, both within and without.

We, the church, need to hear this message of strange comfort, again and again, in every age. We need to hear it not only to call us back from our own personal precipices, or to restrain our worst tendencies, but also because this message reminds us how the prophetic witness calls us into an unexpected posture: fearlessness. The prophets tell us that only God is to be feared, which is to say, to be understood as *ultimate*. Everything else—even the crises of our own time—is contingent. Temporal. Changeable. Worthy of our honest sweat more so than our bitter tears. We are called to be fearlessly loving creatures, filled with that same undaunted Spirit of God, seeing—as God does—something bigger and deeper and more substantial than the travails of the present time.

And it is with this in mind that we, along with the rich young man, meet Jesus on the road today. And make no mistake, it is a test, this encounter—a test of understanding.

Perhaps, like this young man, we fail to notice that Jesus is always, always on a journey toward a new horizon, toward a new consciousness called the Kingdom. We fail to notice his purpose and so instead we drag him to a stop in the dominion of our own fears, reaching out to him with our flattery and our fickle anxieties.

“Good Teacher,” we say, “tell us how to be good, too.” Tell us how to transcend the inadequacy we feel. Show us the solution to the messes we have made. Solve the riddle of our lives for us. For what good is it to be rich—to be surrounded by groceries and wedding dresses and nights on the couch—when the fabric of life itself is coming undone at the seams?

And Jesus looks on, loving us, forgiving us for not understanding. And he says the thing we did not expect. He says,

*Let it come undone, then. Let it go. Let all of it go—your fears, your comforts, your assumptions about the way the world must be. Let it go and follow me where I am going. Follow me out past defeat, past despair, past the tired tropes of history with its winners and losers, its so-called rich and its forgotten poor. Give it all away. All of it. Leave room in your life and your heart for nothing but the fearlessness of a love that knows its own costliness and is willing to pay. A love that is priceless, as free as the air you breathe.*

Jesus has come to say—and to live, and to be—that message which the prophets had always shared: there is something more to this world than the present time reveals. There is crisis and there is failure, yes, and they demand our response as stewards of one another. But we do so only in relationship to a deeper truth, a more pervasive possibility: that we were made for more than endless cycles of fear and furor and temporary resolution. We were made for something more lasting than wealth or power or even the knowledge we seek from Good Teachers. We were made to take part in God's fullness. We were made... to be *good* ourselves.

That's the plot twist which Jesus leaves the young man to discover on his own. It's true, he says that *no one is good but God alone*, but we who have seen his glory know the rest of the story: that God does not desire to *be* alone, but has come to *be* with us, to share the divine life with us, to enfold us into the journey toward that distant horizon. God has come in the flesh to give us the one thing the prophets never could: not just a message, but a means. Not just a reminder, but a hand outstretched to guide us toward a Kingdom consciousness.

And it's a funny thing, this enfleshment of the answer to our fears. It suggests that somewhere within our own enfleshment is the resolution we seek. Jesus, in his embrace of our checkered history, demonstrates that the conflict we feel between the groceries and the glaciers; the ordinary and the overwhelming; between our daily bread and the world's deep hunger, is not so much a conundrum to solve, saying, "*Good Teacher, what must I do to stop my heart from breaking?*" No, instead, Jesus is God's invitation to let it break, to let our attentive hearts break wide open, and to see what waits for us on the other side of brokenness.

Because the one thing that is stronger than any crisis we face, and the only way through all of them, is the compassionate, passionate, undaunted love that haunted the dreams of the prophets and which is the light in our Good Teacher's eyes. The love that is God. The love that is ours.

The love that says, "Let's drink our morning coffee and get to work."

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