

## **“Wait, What Day is it Again?”**

**Sermon by Rev. Rachel Knuth**

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-30

I.

Good Morning to you this 5th Sunday after Pentecost, and although we are in the season of ordinary time in the church, we are also, truly in pandemic time. Our summer preaching theme is the Stewardship of Incarnation, and today we'll be considering the stewardship of time. Which brings us to our sermon title: Wait, What Day is it Again?

You might want to go to the kitchen and get another cup of coffee before you really sink into our text for today. Because even though Jesus arrives at the end of our scripture with words of comfort for the weary, he starts out with an apocalyptic tone, and some serious woe. I learned a new phrase this week: “doom-scrolling.” It's when you scroll through apocalyptic news, and it puts you into a terrible funk. It's kind of the mood Jesus seems to be in, at the beginning of our scripture.

To help understand where Jesus is coming from, he has just finished commissioning the disciples, he's going to send them out to share the good news. And here, he addresses the crowds that have assembled. Jesus tells them how great John the Baptist is, comparing him to the prophet Elijah. And then he asks the people gathered, so to what shall I compare all of you? And you can imagine, the people thinking to themselves, Oh, who, me? Well-- you could compare us to Miriam and Moses' generation, or perhaps Isaac and Rebekah-- I mean, if the wild desert-dweller John the Baptist is like Elijah, surely we will score a good comparison. But no, Jesus compares them to whining children who sit in the marketplace complaining. He says really he and John the Baptist can't win for losing-- because when John comes preaching the ascetic way of fasting, the people say he's possessed. And when Jesus comes preaching the way of feasting with outcasts, the people say he's an alcoholic and friend of sinners. In short, the people won't listen to either one of them, and Jesus has just had enough.

But Jesus doesn't stop there; he issues a harsh judgment upon the cities-- Woe to Chorazin, Woe to Bethsaida-- who have heard the good news but refuse to change. It reminds me a bit of Greta Thurnberg, the climate activist, when she told world leaders last year, “How dare you! We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” When the call is to repent, change, act, the people just complain to each other in the marketplace that there isn't enough dancing. And the result is collective paralysis. Then Jesus has his own “how dare you” moment, calling out his home district of Capernaum. He says to them, “will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.”

Finally, Jesus proclaims his interdependent relationship with God, and his tone shifts dramatically. You can almost hear the tenderness in the words themselves. It seems like he's talking to anyone in the crowd who might still be on the fence about following his Way, and he ends with an invitation. He says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." These are well-known words of scripture, words we could really hear right now, in this pandemic season when we don't know what day it is, we are out of sorts, and missing human contact.

## II.

There is more stress in our world, stress that was already increasing, even before covid. A study by anxiety specialist Dr. Robert Leahy shows that the average high-school student today carries as much anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the 1950s. But his research came out in 2008. We can only imagine how much higher anxiety must be in the pandemic. This April, one national mental health hotline reported a 1000% increase in calls over the same month last year. And if you happen to be African-American, LatinX, Chinese-American, or LGBTQ, rates of anxiety and depression are higher. Our mental health system is underfunded, stigmatized, and difficult-to-access. And even more so for marginalized groups. The other Pastors and I are hearing more of you saying you feel depressed and anxious. It hurts to be apart from one another. Many of you long to be in the sanctuary. And some of you haven't felt the touch of another human being in 4 months. Way back in February your Pastors began planning for the liturgical year. As we were thinking about the year ahead, we were anticipating a contentious election year. And we talked about how to hold our congregation through the feelings people might have as we enter another fire season. But we had no idea we'd be in a pandemic and showing up for a racial justice movement. So what are we to do, and how might the words of Jesus speak to us today, whatever day "today" is?

## III.

I was thinking about the emotion Jesus expresses when he compares his generation to unsatisfied, spoiled children, whining in the marketplace. Like, if we get ourselves into his shoes, what is that feeling? Maybe exasperation. The Gospel of Matthew has an underlying theme of pain about rejection of the Jesus Movement, and the woe that Jesus names for the cities belies that pain. So we have both exasperation and pain. I'm not a psychologist, but I think the word for *exasperation* plus *pain* might be "despair." So how does Jesus move on from despair? Because he does, he moves from despair all the way to gathering the weary into himself. How does he do that?

I think Jesus shows us that the way forward is through. What I mean by that is, that our shared experience of despair may be a beginning point for our transformation. Because if we can come alongside our despair, and stew in it a bit, and let it get us a little riled up, it can stir us to justice. The queer ecofeminist

instagram writer, @borealfaun, writes that one purpose of despair is “to decompose old systems.” She says, “There are people in this world building new worlds out of fires of despair. A lot of those people are Black and brown people, transgender people, disabled people, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people, ...folks who have been forced to carry the despairs of societies and cultures, many not even their own.” Did you catch that? Despair might have a purpose, and that purpose might be to “decompose old systems.” Systems that prevent black, brown, and queer people from accessing health care; systems that enable police brutality; systems that keep poor people living in poverty; systems that are built on white supremacy. The despair we are feeling, might actually be useful. I might add to @borealfaun’s reflection: God is with us in our despair. God doesn’t promise we will live lives free from despair, but that God will be with us. And when we experience God walking with us in our despair, we can begin to have enough strength and energy to work toward justice.

We notice that Jesus does not say come to me, all you who are privileged and free from pain, and I will give you rest. He says, come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Rest is for the marginalized who have been carrying exasperation and despair. Rest is for those showing up for racial justice. Rest is for those experiencing worry and fear amidst a pandemic. Rest is for those anxious about fire season, and even worried about fireworks this weekend. Rest is for those who feel their stomach knotting up when they think about the upcoming election. In short, rest is for you, rest is for me, rest is for us. And after taking a sabbath, put on a new yoke, a new way of being. Hear these words of comfort from Jesus, and I invite you to hear them as if they were meant for you, because they truly are: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

“My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” I leave you with the image of being yoked with Jesus. A yoke is a farm tool, it’s the wooden harness that joins two animals together-- and it’s used to plow the land so that crops can be planted. As we accept Jesus’ invitation to be yoked with him, I wonder what seeds will be planted, because the Way of Jesus is to turn despair into the compost out of which something vital and nourishing might grow. I wonder what healthy and life-giving crops might be cultivated because of this partnership. I wonder how wisdom might be known by her fruits.

It could be that the soil we plow in the ground of our despair today, may be a gift for the next generation, a gift we will never see, but that will enable them to address the needs, and possibly the despair, of their time.

#### IV.

So if you’re feeling the exasperation and pain we’re calling despair, here are some remedies from Jesus today:

- Lean into the despair, because the way forward is through.

- When you're angry, look for ways to give thanks to God.
- Join Jesus in plowing the ground of your heart and our world, that new life might be planted in you and our community.

Also:

- Stop doom-scrolling through your phone.
- Go outside and let something beautiful take your breath away.
- Allow God's grace to wash over you. **Amen.**