



Roanoke, Virginia

July 11, 2021

“Sheep Without a Shepherd”

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Sermon:

A lot happens in Mark chapter six. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. He sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. These are



major events. Yet the passage we just read from the same chapter, pales in comparison. Sure, Jesus heals many people near the end, but otherwise, our verses seem to have missed the dramatic boat.

Things happen fast in Mark. One event quickly flows from the next. You get the sense that time is short. The Greek word *eutheos* we translate as “immediately” in English, occurs over 40 times in the gospel. (There are just 16 chapters in Mark, that is an average of 2.5 “immediatelies” every chapter!) Jesus moves quickly from one healing to the next, from parable to parable, the scenes are hopping.

The urgency in Mark is reflected in our verses for today. After the apostles relay all they had done and taught on their mission, Jesus recognizes their need to rest. Jesus calls them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (v31). They cross the lake in a boat, but they do not get the rest that Jesus prescribes for them, because “many [people] saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them” (v33). Not only was Jesus’ mission expanding, but people literally tracked Jesus down. Mark describes the people as running faster on foot than Jesus and his disciples traveling by boat. The urgency of the gospel and the people’s need for it are too great to waste any time.

It all sounds exhausting, really, when we stop to think about it. The disciples must have been so tired. They’ve been on the move, healing, casting out demons, and preaching the good news to anyone who would listen. They’re tired, overstimulated, underfed, and in need of rest.

Meanwhile, remember, Jesus has just lost John the Baptist, his cousin and the prophet who prepared the way and inaugurated Jesus’ ministry with baptism. Jesus is heartbroken.

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (v31), Jesus says. “Come away.” We hear both tenderness and longing in those words. Yes, Jesus wants to provide a time of rest and recuperation for his friends, but he is also weary himself. The hunger he articulates is his own.

Here, we have a glimpse of Jesus’ *human* life. We recognize his need to withdraw, his desire for solitude and prayer, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide. This glimpse at Jesus’ humanness reminds us that while Jesus is divine, Jesus is also, somehow, like us. It reminds us that God, the God of the whole universe, grows weary, hungers, sleeps, eats, withdraws, and grieves. In all of these mundane but crucial ways, our God is like us. Our God rests.ⁱ

He is also like us in that sometimes, his best-laid plans go awry.ⁱⁱ His boat idea doesn’t pan out because the crowds anticipate it and follow on foot. By the time Jesus and the disciples reach the shore, the crowds are there waiting – wanting to see Jesus, hoping to touch him, hear him, be healed by him.

I imagine, on a more trivial scale, that it’s a bit like being the popular one with your kid. Our three-year-old daughter has a perfectly good – more than good! – father, who can do anything for



her that Mommy can do, but when Daddy offers to get her out of bed so Mommy can sleep in, or take her to the bathroom in the middle of dinner – all she wants is “Mommy to do it!” Now, I love her, and I know there will be a day when I will miss those words, but sometimes I’d just love to hear her say, “I want Daddy to do it!”

When Jesus gets to shore and everyone wants him or wants to be healed by him, Jesus could say it’s too much – he could turn the boat around and sail back in the other direction. No one would blame him, but that’s not what he chooses to do. As Mark describes it, “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (v34).

“He had compassion for them.”

As strange as it is to describe aloud, the Greek word for compassion is related to one’s bowels being moved. Meaning, you literally feel a shift, a change in your body when you feel compassion. Compassion is something you feel deep inside – something that could change you at the core, something that could move you to action. As Frederick Buechner describes it, compassion is the capacity for “feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else’s skin.”

Jesus had compassion for them. Jesus felt what it was like to live in these people’s skin.

That’s not an easy way to live, is it? To really feel what other people feel.

My friend Drew is a pastor in PA and a member of my preaching group, By the Vine. He serves an inner-city church, built around a medical ministry in an underserved neighborhood. Early last summer, tragedy struck his church and neighborhood when a 14-year-old member named Tyrone was shot and killed on the street. An innocent child, simply in the wrong place at the wrong time – but that doesn’t explain it. Not really. It was more than that. Tyrone was a victim of circumstance – the result of injustice, poverty, and societal failure.

Drew has always had concern for the class division, racial divides, and gun violence that riddled the neighborhood. He writes that now, however, he knows that “what we see on the news about gun violence and protests; what we may feel about racial and class divisions, is no abstraction in our church.”ⁱⁱⁱ He has seen, he has literally walked alongside the grief experienced by the children and adults in his neighborhood as he sat with that young man’s mother, marched in the street for reform, and preached an outdoor funeral service in the height of covid in a packed city park. He writes, “to think that these are issues that do not impact the lives of our own church ... is to make invisible the children of God.” His heart doesn’t ache *for* his neighbors. His heart aches *with* them.

Jesus knew what it was like to live in these people’s skin. He knew what it was like for them to feel wounded and sick, lonely and heartbroken, rejected and abused. He understood the ways their bodies had let them down, their community and social structure had let them down, how their leaders had let them down.



After all, their leader was meant to be their shepherd. Their leader was supposed to feel compassion for them. So, who was supposed to be shepherding these sheep? Why, the king, of course. Herod. The very one who had taken John the Baptist from this world. Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” His words are more than pastoral. They are also a critique of Herod. Herod, the one who is supposed to rule with compassion, the one who is supposed to shepherd his flock like David did, has not only failed to show compassion, he has wrought pain and suffering to his people. Herod holds a feast for the wealthy, Jesus feeds the five thousand in the grass. For Mark, no earthly king can compare. It is Jesus who shepherds the flock.

In Jesus, God gets involved, embedded, in our lives here on earth.

This is not a God who creates us and leaves us all to our own devices. This is a God who feels what we feel. Who needs rest like we need rest. A God who is one among us – who is one of us. And yet, this God who is one of us has, unlike us, boundless patience, and unlike us, boundless compassion. He sees beneath the surface and gets to the heart of the matter.

So, when the boat lands at Gennesaret and the crowds go wild, pushing and jostling to get close to Jesus, he has compassion. The people carry their sick to him on mats. In every village and city Jesus approaches, swarms of people wanting, needing something from him line the marketplaces. They press against him. They plead. They beg to touch the fringe of his robe and receive healing.

Jesus' response? Once again, his response is compassion. "All who touched him were healed."

Two weeks ago, I preached on the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5. All she did was touch the hem of Jesus' clothes and she was healed. She had been bleeding for 12 years. She'd spent all she had on doctors and treatments that only made her worse. But she believed that if she could just touch the hem of his garment, she would be made well.

In that same chapter, Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter died. Then Jesus broke all protocol, touching her dead body to bring her to life again.

“All who touched him were healed.”

Some people's ailments are plain as day to see. Others' illness, grief, anguish, exhaustion are packed far beneath the surface. It takes a shepherd who can sense, who can feel what it's like to walk around in that person's skin to recognize the truth.

Where are you hurting? What makes you so tired? What keeps you awake at night?

We live in a world of acute and constant need. Sheep die without their shepherds.



The good news is not only that Jesus was attentive to his disciples then, he is attentive to us now. He sees what is pushing and pulling at us as we go throughout our day. He knows what will happen if we fall into the trap of working too hard or trying too hard to fix ourselves without attending to our souls and our spiritual and emotional needs. When we do not stop to think, to ponder, to wonder, to pay attention to pray, Jesus says, “Come away to a deserted place and rest a while.”

Things happen fast in Mark. Things happen fast in this life. The world, our health, our friends or family, our leaders will let us down – it is inevitable. But Mark is here to tell us – I am here to tell you – Jesus sees, Jesus knows. And Jesus invites us to something better, something safer, something deeper than this life. May you know the peace of Christ. May you trust in the one who has compassion. May you follow the Good Shepherd and find your rest in him.

ⁱ Debie Thomas, “Rest a While” in *Journey with Jesus* (July 22, 2018). www.journeywithjesus.net

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, “Come Away with Me” in *Journey with Jesus* (July 12, 20215). www.journeywithjesus.net

ⁱⁱⁱ Drew Stockstill, “Tyrone Gibson, Child of the Covenant” (June 10, 2020). www.christlutheranchurchhbg.org

