

Isaiah 42:10-17
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
“Back Where We Started”

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Jesus is on the move today. This shouldn't surprise us. Read the gospels and you'll see that Jesus is often on the move. He's hardly ever sitting still. This is especially true in Luke's gospel version. In Luke's telling of Jesus' life, even before he's been born, while he is still in Mary's belly, Jesus has to move from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And it's a hard journey, one made necessary by realities beyond Mary's control. After he is born, Jesus has to move again. Just a couple weeks, maybe a couple years old, and he becomes a refugee along with his parents. The land they're living in is no longer safe. A paranoid king, fearful of losing his power someday, orders that all the male babies and boys be killed. So, Mary and Joseph have to head south for Egypt, into the desert. It's not the last time Jesus will spend time in the desert. Fast forward 30 years and he's in the wilderness, by the River Jordan, getting baptized. No sooner has he gone under the water, he's on shore, his clothes still dripping wet, and the spirit whisks him off into the desert. Like a feather in the wind, the spirit moves him west. He's in the desert for 40 days and nights. No food, no drink, just the coyotes and the devil to keep him company. At the end of it all, when neither the coyotes nor the devil can get the better of him, Luke records, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, moved to Galilee, and word got around about him, and the crowds came." No doubt to meet the man who could outlast 40 days and nights in the desert. To see if this powerful man, full of the spirit, might be able to heal them of their diseases and set them free from whatever's ailing them in the world. And sometimes Jesus does, but more often Jesus doesn't. More often, Jesus does not go where the crowds are. He does not move with the crowds.

Some people move with the crowds. Wherever there's a crowd or something that looks like the start of the crowd, there you'll find some people. They can't seem to decide for themselves what they want to do or where they want to go. What's everyone else doing? I guess I'll go and do that. Such people can look very busy. They will look to the world like they're trying to find something, or maybe like they're trying to save something. They'll have all the marks of someone who is full of purpose. And maybe they are, or maybe they're just restless; into crowdsourcing.

Some people move with the crowds. Jesus just isn't one of them. Like that little baby inside Mary's belly, the young man being carried away by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus is not one to move with the crowds. The way Mark puts it in our reading today, Jesus is actually trying to move away from the crowds, and to get his disciples to do the same. It's been a long couple of days for Jesus. In the past few days Jesus has returned home to Nazareth only to be rejected by his friends and neighbors. "Where do you get the authority to say the things you've been saying?" they want to know. "Who do you think you are anyway? You're just that kid we used to push around on the playground. You're just Mary and Joseph's son." Then came news that his cousin John had been murdered. And the crowds of the needy just kept coming, everyone asking Jesus to give more, more, more. Some people might have loved the attention. Jesus did not. "We got to get away," he tells the disciples. "I haven't even had to time to sit down and eat a good meal all week."

He makes them get into a boat, not to go to a restaurant but to go to the desert. "Let's go see who we are apart from the crowds; apart from our busyness and our service. Let's go see who we are when there's nothing to do."

Except when they get to the desert, they discover that the crowds have followed them there. And this, notes Mark, moves Jesus to compassion. The word for “compassion” here is an interesting word. It’s the Greek word that gets translated bowels, entrails, gut. In other words, when Mark says that Jesus is moved with compassion at the sight of the crowds, he’s saying that something very, very deep within Jesus has taken hold of him. Something like what a pregnant woman feels when her baby kicks. It’s just a little kick, a small reminder from the baby that they are still there inside you. Then, it’s a harder and longer kick—the baby saying, it’s time to go. It’s time for me to make a move. Only the baby can’t move on its own. The mother is going to have to push, to labor, to move the baby. It’s a kind of shared suffering that is necessary if the baby and mother are both going to live on. The baby of course doesn’t know this, but the mother does. And in that moment, she is filled with compassion and moved to action from deep within.

So it is with Jesus when he sees the crowds. He calls them sheep without a shepherd, children without a mother, and he is moved to healing action.

I don’t know if you caught it or not, but there’s a part of this story that is missing. Mark read for us verses 30 to 34 and then he skipped on down to verse 53, because that’s what today’s assigned preaching text said to do. But there’s a whole 19 verses that we didn’t get to hear, and to truly appreciate this story and what’s going on in it, you almost need to open a Bible to chapter 6 of Mark’s gospel and see what happens in those missing verses. In verse 35 the disciples go to Jesus to tell him they think it best if he sends the crowd home. It’s getting late in the day, everyone is hungry—including them—and all anyone has to eat are five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus, however, has a different plan in mind, and that’s to give the crowd whatever they’ve got. Always better that everyone get

a little. By verse 42 everyone has not only eaten, but everyone is full; about 5,000 men plus women and children. Still looking to get away from the crowds, however, Jesus wastes no time in telling the disciples to get in the boat—verse 43—and to sail east for Bethsaida. Meanwhile, he stays behind to break up the crowd, perhaps thinking that if he creates a little diversion, it will give the disciples time to slip away without being noticed. The disciples won't be able to do it though, because in verse 47 a storm stirs up the sea and they are caught having to row against the wind and waves. Thinking themselves dead in the water, Jesus shows up on the sea—walking. Now Mark is careful to note that Jesus never intended to stop and help out the drowning disciples. It's as if he is just trying to get to Bethsaida himself. He knows it's been several hours since he sent the fellas on ahead and he's just looking to catch up with them. "I'll just take a short-cut and walk across the Sea of Galilee," he thinks to himself. "No one will see me. After all, it's the middle of the night." What a surprise it must have been to discover the disciples still out on the water, still not arrived in Bethsaida.

We all know what happens next, though no one knows for sure how it happens. Jesus gets in the boat with them, the storm stops, and in the very next verse, verse 53, they arrive at...Gennesaret. Did you catch that? They set sail for Bethsaida, which is on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, but they land in Gennesaret, which is on the northwest shore. They have arrived in the opposite direction of where they wanted to go. Presumably, the storm must have pushed them way off course. That's not the depressing part, though. The depressing part is that Gennesaret puts them back where they started, near the desert, back with the needy crowds.

Now what are they going to do? They've gone from tired to exhausted; from hungry to full to hungry again; they've been holding the world together with bubble gum and chicken wire. Maybe those pesky crowds won't be there. They step off the boat and sure enough, they are. Now what are they going to do?

Some of you know this question. You've been out on the frontlines, trying to hold up the world, to work it into something better for our children. You've been caring for sick loved ones, doing everything you can to get them help, but every day you wake up right back where you started.

Mark says that when Jesus stepped off the boat with his disciples, they were met by a crowd of frantic people. Fathers looking for someone to heal their daughters; sisters looking for healing on behalf of their brothers; addicts, cripples, the diseased and disenfranchised; everyone looking to get back some piece of themselves. And Jesus tells them, "Look, if it helps any, you can touch my clothing." And everyone who did was made whole again.

In his poem "The Little Gidding," T.S. Eliot writes that:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

Let me put it to you this way. About four years ago, one of the first patients I had as a hospice chaplain was a young boy, about 20 years old, who had lived his whole life with a severe case of autism. He couldn't find his words. When he tried to speak, it came out sounding like shrieks. If you tried to get close to him, he would swing his arms and back

¹ Eliot, T.S. (1969). The Complete Poems and Plays. London: Faber & Faber Limited, p. 198.

away. He even struggled to let his mother touch him when he needed help getting dressed or eating meals. To complicate things, I met him not long after he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. “There’s almost nothing anyone can do to comfort him or calm him,” his mother told me. “He wakes up in the night moaning and tossing and turning.” She tried to give him a teddy bear or stuffed animal to hold—a piece of his childhood—but nothing worked. Until one day, when he’d had an accident and spilled some food down his shirt, she grabbed an old tee-shirt of her own to put on him. “It was like a magic elixir,” she told me at his funeral. “He’d put on my shirt and it was like he was okay.”

Do you know how that kind of magic works? The touch of a mother is the touch of God. The smell of grace against our skin. It takes us back to where we started. Do you know how to do that kind of magic? I think you do. I think you do.

Amen.