

## **Lectionary 11 A 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

June 14, 2020

Matthew 9:35-10:23; Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The festival half of the church year came to a conclusion last Sunday. The great festivals celebrating what God has done for us in Jesus. The expectation and annunciation of redemption: Advent. God becoming flesh for us in Jesus Christ: Christmas. A new hope and new light in the darkness: Epiphany, Transfiguration. A love that suffers for the sake of the world: Lent and Holy Week. Victory over evil and death: Easter. The presence and power of the Spirit: Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity.

And now the festival half ends. And the green-colored Sundays of the year begin. The Sundays called by some churches *ordinary time*. Ordinary in the Latin sense of an ordered progression. Ordinal numbers. Not ordinary in the sense of boring. Not boring at all. The green season of the work of the church. The Christian life. The first half of the year is the work of Christ. The second half of the year is the work of his followers, the church. Let it not be said that Lutherans do not believe in works. Lutherans believe that the work of Christ precedes the work of his followers. His love cultivates our love. His service summons our service. His actions inspire our actions. He is the vine, we are the branches. The work of Christ precedes the work of his followers.

And what great lessons we have for this occasion when we pivot from the work of Christ to the work of the church. God commissions us as his people to do his work. From Exodus: God tells Moses to teach the Israelites: *you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation* From the psalm today, which will be our hymn of the day: *We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture*. And from the gospel: the sending of the twelve disciples, each of whom is named. Jesus surely chose twelve because there were twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus commissions a people in the same way that God in the Torah commissioned a people made up of twelve named tribes. The grandeur of what we read in Moses and our psalm today is claimed by Jesus as he commissions us to be his people. The work of Christ summons us and equips us for his mission. Christ Jesus *co*-missions us for his mission.

And at first, this great enterprise sounds amazing. *Proclaim the good news... cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons*. These instructions are basically the same in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But Matthew alone adds these dark predictions: *They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and*

*children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.* Matthew's gospel really has a sense that the work of Jesus will be met with opposition. It's Matthew who tells the story of King Herod's slaughter of the infants and toddlers. It's Matthew who mentions Jeremiah. Jeremiah the prophet who was ignored and harassed and persecuted for telling God's truth. The name Jeremiah only occurs in three places in the Christian New Testament, all of them in Matthew. Of all the Christian apostles and evangelists and writers, Matthew has the strongest sense that our mission to the world— this great enterprise of good news, casting out evil, curing and healing— this great enterprise will be opposed by the world. This amazing and good mission goes counter to the world, and we should expect opposition and danger. We should be prepared for that.

Matthew is the assigned gospel for the year 2020. We have a lot of Matthew between now and Advent. Unless I get creative and change the lectionary, we have Matthew every Sunday through Thanksgiving except Reformation Sunday. Matthew is the gospel for 2020. And I think given the shape our world is in— the danger and hostility of our world— I think Matthew, the *assigned* gospel for 2020, is also the *right* gospel for 2020. For our church in this time and place. It is a grave moment for the American people and what is left of the American idea. When I look at our broken country, I think of the collapse of the kingdom of David. When the people disintegrated into tribes, saying,

*What share do we have in David?*

*We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.*

*To your tents, O Israel!*

*Look now to your own house, O David.* (1 Kings 12:16)

To your tents, O Israel. Every tribe for themselves. I think of Paul's words to the Galatians: *If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.* [Galatians 5:15] Biting and devouring until everyone is utterly destroyed. Matthew declares today that, *"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* Our nation and my fellow citizens feel like strangers to me, succumbing to madness and destruction. Strangers to me, maybe, but not strangers to the Bible.

Harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. In this very sober context, as Jesus launches this great enterprise into a dangerous and uncertain world, he names four animals. As he sends his followers out into that world where brother betrays brother he names four animals. *I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.* Those first two animals have four legs: sheep and wolves. Sheep are notoriously naive and wolves are notoriously vicious. So, Jesus says, we have to be something different. We have to be a mixture of serpents and doves. We are to be shrewd like a snake. Cunning. But simultaneously innocent. Sweet, like a dove Both, at the same time.

It's an intriguing paradox. These words of Jesus, "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" show up in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (39b) which some scholars believe is an indication that these are original words of Jesus of Nazareth. It can only mean that Jesus senses our temptation

to be only one or the other. To be a wolf. Or a sheep. A victimizer or a victim. That's the temptation. The great Calvinist translators and commentators of the English Reformation said this: *By the mixing of these beasts' natures together, [Jesus] will not have our wisdom to be malicious, nor our simplicity mad, but a certain form of good nature as exquisitely framed of both of them.* [The Geneva Bible, Matthew 10:16] Our wisdom must not be malicious. And our simplicity must not be madness. Together, as both serpent and dove, we will be good natured.

I think that's so crucial. At Divinity School, one of my professors said "A Christian must be a cautious optimist, or an enthusiastic pessimist." Which would you be? A cautious optimist? An enthusiastic pessimist? That's the paradox of doves and serpents. If your optimism carries you away to madness, then that's no good. If your prudence becomes cynicism and malice, that's no good, either. Our wisdom must not be malicious, the English Calvinists said. And our simplicity must not be be madness.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to people who are harassed and helpless, where brother betrays brother. His enterprise is their enterprise. And their enterprise is our enterprise. It is indeed a broken world, and a noxious world. But this is not new to the people who wrote the Bible. We are part of their enterprise, and we really can cure and heal and proclaim good news and overcome evil. We can do it with wisdom and simplicity. We can do it without forfeiting our minds or our souls. *I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.* Amen.