

One of my favorite parts of working for the church is that we get all sorts of chances for beginnings. There's January 1st, a beginning we share with the whole world. There's the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the church's year. There's Christmas, the beginning of Jesus' life. There's Easter, an especially cool beginning. And there's days like today, the beginning of a new school year, of Sunday School, of all sorts of programming and students lining the sidewalks. I don't know, in some ways it's just another day, but I can't help catching the excitement and maybe even the hope of starting something new. All that to say, happy Kick-Off Sunday! At this very moment, we've got a group of kids in the building next door learning about that sacred calendar of ours. I just got finished adding some wrinkles to our teen class's brains. Choir's back at it. Y'all are here. All in all, it's a great day.

Since I got back from sabbatical a few weeks ago, we've started reading the prophet Jeremiah in our Thursday morning Bible Study. Jeremiah's tough, now. It's all about the scary fate facing God's people and why things have gotten so bad. The main things it comes down to? First, the people that go to worship don't actually care about God anymore; we talked about that last week. And second, the rich are getting richer at the expense of the poor getting poorer. Or really, the rich are getting richer at the expense of everyone getting poorer. But it's especially felt by the poorest among them. If only the Bible were relevant to modern life, right?

Anyway, as our Bible study's encountered all that, we've been spending a lot of time on what's called Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology came out of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America during the middle of the 20th Century. Growing numbers of people lived under poverty and oppression, and those that spoke out were mysteriously "disappeared." Amid horrendous conditions and petrifying fear, some parts of the church took a stand, recognizing that a great overarching truth of scripture could be distilled down to the claim that God exercises a "preferential option for the poor." That's really just a fancy way of saying that, when God intervenes in the world, our stories almost always show God using the least likely by the world's standards to make things right. And, the people things are made right for are those that are, as they say, "on the underside of history." In other words, God rarely comes to the rescue of those with five vacation homes. And when God makes use of people, it's rarely those we expect. Both the prophets Jeremiah and Samuel were children when God called them. King David wasn't just a backwoods sheep farmer, he was the runt of the family and the youngest to boot. Moses was a murderer with a speech impediment. Paul was successful in his own right, sure, but before he found his pen, he was a persecutor of the faith. John the Baptist was homeless and survived on a diet consisting mostly of bugs. Even Jesus fits the mold! I mean, we know our side of the story, but from the outside looking in, he's a fatherless child born in a stable.

I don't know how many of y'all've really been around stables. The image we have in Nativity scenes makes 'em seem picturesque and sweet, cute animals unnaturally interested in a spotless family framed by arched timbers and angelic song. But y'all, I grew up with cleaning out stables as an occasional punishment. Our Nativity scenes conveniently (and mercifully) don't depict the reality of stable floors, stable walls, and often stable occupants. That is not where kings're meant to be born. Which is the whole point. Our world expects royalty to show it. Some expect good deeds to lead to stockpiles of earthly rewards. A lot of us, even if we hate to admit it, give more credence to the observations of the wealthy than to those of the poor, as though the thickness of your wallet indicates how smart you are. God's preferential option for the poor pushes against all of that. Kings will fail and empires will fall. Isaiah says the poor'll finally have a place to live when the world gets its act together enough to strip the wealthiest of their excess. It's terrifying if you're on the tippity top, and it's meant to be. But for the entire rest of us, it's fascinating how much resistance there is to this idea.

God has some serious issues with the wealthiest in the world, meanwhile I'm sitting at the gas station crossing my fingers for this week's scratch off. Maybe I don't want the rich to get evened out because I'm afraid I'll one day get evened out, too. Or maybe, maybe I've bought into the very popular and poisoned fallacy that the richest deserve their wealth and the poor deserve their poverty.

I say all this because we're facing a lot of wild stuff with this new beginning. That passage from James is one of the hardest I've read in a long time. And it's hard because while there's a big part of me that wants to pump my fist and claim I'd land on the right side, I'm not sure how well I actually do it. Theory's easy. But when the stablehand walks in those doors, am I really going to invite them to sit right next to me? I mean, I've got a pretty nice seat up here, but would I give it up? I've been in stables. I'm familiar with the smell and the gross little bits of stuff that cling to your pant leg only to deposit themselves in a trail wherever you go. I can come up with all sorts of totally reasonable justifications for why I shouldn't invite them to sit next to me. For one thing, it'd be weird to have someone come all the way up here just to take a load off. I wear white vestments; drycleaning's inconvenient and expensive. I like my personal space. I need to concentrate on the service. I've only got one hymnal up here. I'd have to turn sideways to get out there to say the peace. I might have to shake an unwashed hand. I might be worried how the stablehand will behave, how loud they're gonna be, how much help they'll need navigating the prayer book. I might even risk more.

That all makes perfectly good sense, at least according to the claim our world makes on us. But the Kingdom of God demands better. The Kingdom demands different. Because every single one of those totally reasonable justifications ignores the other person and puts my fear, my disgust, my discomfort, and my materialism ahead of a human being. And if God's pattern means anything, that human being is likely to be a purer reflection of God than any of us wearing fine clothing. Countless kings, prophets, and even the Messiah came into this world looking like, probably smelling like that stablehand. As Christians, it does us no good to turn our noses up at those in the greatest need. It's bad for our souls, a kind of rot that takes hold and fuels the likes of Jeremiah and James to make us better. But it's also bad for Christianity. We talked last week about what the world sees of us and the many hypocrisies rife in the modern Christian world. This is one of 'em. If we want Christianity to be taken seriously as the world-altering gift it can be, we've got to welcome every soul that steps on our grounds, and we've got to extra-special welcome those we're most uncomfortable with. All of 'em. I don't care one bit about the reasonable justifications as to why we shouldn't 'cause I think it's safe to say that God abhors the ways we squirm out of our duty. Because we say we follow this particular God and rely on these particular scriptures, we don't have the privilege of turning people away, telling them they're welcome if they just sit over there, or pointing to other places where they can find help so long as they leave this place first. That's not Christianity. I don't know what it is, but it's not what we're about. That door's open to all.

Actually, I'm kinda glad our new year starts here with Proverbs and James and an unnamed woman reminding us across the centuries with unquestioning clarity that no matter who comes to our door, we will love them, we will care for them, and we will walk with them. Maybe we can't offer everything they need, but we will not abandon them, and we certainly won't not try because they make us uncomfortable. I will say this, it's hard to be that faithful all the time. And as a little church, it's impossible to offer everything a soul could need. But thanks be to God, when we grow tired or when we find a gap in what we can do, we have the privilege to step back and try again. If Christ's Resurrection at Easter teaches us anything--and it does--it's that the end is never the end. We've got countless opportunities to begin again. And when we do, to begin again with an open heart for God and open arms for all of God's people.