

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

RESTLESS IN THE WILDERNESS

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Fred Niedner

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He 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. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 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.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed (evsw,|zonto).

Author's Note: Proclaimers wisely resist complaining about the lectionary hands they're dealt. It's bad form and wastes words. That said, the Revised Common Lectionary offers a badly mutilated gospel lesson this week, so we need certain context reminders for these isolated snippets of Mark 6. First, the death of John the Baptist, beheaded and served up as a banquet

dessert, immediately precedes and likely provides a partial rationale for the wilderness retreat on which Jesus takes the disciples. Second, Jesus addresses the hunger for food and leadership the pursuing crowds experience in the wilderness by providing them nothing less than the messianic feast. The lectionary skips that, however, along with the water-walking sea-crossing that comes between the two landings in verses 34 and 53. For the five weeks to follow, we'll have manna from John 6 in such abundance we'll weary of it as did the original Exodus generation. For now, however, we must gather up some of the leftover fragments of the feast we'll skip, and somehow make a Crossings meal of them.

DIAGNOSIS: Harried Sheep without a Shepherd

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Bewildered, Restless, Leaderless

This "lonely place" to which we've escaped today looks strangely familiar. The Spirit directed Jesus here after his baptism, and now Jesus brings us across the waters to the same wilderness. Our work is hard and the news of late is awful. (Head-chopping Herod and his sleazy courtesans reappear in every generation to trample on all things sacred.) We are weary and seek respite, but the crowd, perhaps even more restless and desperate than we are, will not leave us alone. We have no food even for ourselves, yet everyone wants something from us, perhaps even a piece of us. We didn't invite these crowds who now face starvation and other predicaments even worse than the ones they've fled. Who will clean up this mess? And whom do we blame? The craving crowd? The Herod figures who serve their own needs and leave us like sheep without a shepherd?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Set up Better yet (if we're honest), we blame God, who throws us to the godforsaken crowds. We've been set up, led straight into

temptation. For some reason, God repeatedly lures us into the wilderness, where the restless, hungry, thirsty, leaderless crowds find us and demand we satisfy their needs—now. But we have nothing to give them. So here in this wordless, no-place place they murmur, murmur, and murmur some more. It's infectious, and now we murmur, too, against the crowds and against God. Why don't we have what we need if we're to give the crowds something satisfying—food, peace, healing, rest, or at least some clear directions? We're dying out here, God. Have you noticed?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Fed Up

We're fed up with going unfed. Since God has dumped us and abandoned us in yet another wilderness, we dump God. We'd walk away if we had anywhere to go, but since we don't, we merely quit . . . both trying and trusting. Let God clean up the messes God lets fester everywhere. If everything happens for a reason, God can take the rap for all the cr*p that happens out here among the abandoned sheep who have no shepherd. To borrow a line from another fed-up wilderness trekker in some distant water-crossing lesson, "Yes, we are right to be angry. Angry enough to die." We slouch into an eternal sulk.

PROGNOSIS: Still in the Wilderness, but Newly Clothed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Christ Puts Us On

The wilderness is everywhere, and no one escapes it, but going all the way back to Hagar, God somehow manages to find wilderness wanderers. Hence, in the wilderness, we learn the truth about God, discover who God is, find that God is for us. God joins us, comes among us. This time we see it in Jesus' response to lost wanderers. He has compassion, which happens to be a deadly response to another's suffering because it ultimately costs you everything, including life itself. For better or worse, genuine compassion makes the sufferer and the

beholder of suffering one flesh, and compassion will soon enough take Jesus to Jerusalem, and to the cross, where he will join us not only in life, but in death. Ultimately, this is the only response that offers any solution that lasts, any real wholeness, or what we dub "salvation" (as opposed to quick, cheap, temporary fixes).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): We Put on Christ
In the darkness outside Jerusalem, we come to trust that the wilderness is our place of belonging—because he is there, always. He shepherds us, feeds and heals us. Even the fringes of his garments have the power to heal, indeed, to "save" ... as they did the hemorrhaging woman on the way to Jairus's home. These same garments he would lose twice in the end, first when soldiers dressed him up like a joke of a king, and later when they stripped and enthroned him on a cross that bore the sign, "The King of the Jews." Sometimes, therefore, when the emperor has no clothes, that's exactly as it should be—and the child, or the sheep, who belongs to God sees the naked emperor and quietly rejoice over this sweet secret of his leadership. We die out here—with him, in him. That's our great, good news.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Restless and Dressed in our Flesh, He Touches the World

Among other things, all this means the crucified and risen one has dressed himself once more. Now, he has put us on. We are his garments, which he wears everywhere as he restlessly roams Galilee and beyond, a risen one on the loose in the world. When the bewildered, hungry, and leaderless come weeping, clamoring, begging, even murmuring, and they touch us, Yeshua ("salvation"), wrapped in our flesh and blood, comes into their lives, homes, wilderness places. The craving crowds can't exhaust us, because when we give them ourselves as food, drink, and comfort, in truth we feed them him. And as we'll learn repeatedly over the next five weeks and beyond, this makes of us

all part of an eternal, inexhaustible feast at which we are
hosts and guests, the fed as well as the fed on.