

## Proper 9 (C)

### Lk 10.1-20

Did you all hear about the recent archeological discovery that happened in northern Palestine? It's a discovery that's immediately related to this morning's gospel lesson. Last week archeologists found a remarkably well-preserved papyrus document near the city of Nain in southern Galilee, close to the border of Samaria. Initial estimates are that the document is around 2,000 years old. Based on close analysis of the text, it appears that the document is a copy of the classifieds section from a Galilean newspaper. There are some ads for used camels and a few legal notices, but there was one ad in particular that caught the eye of the archeologists who discovered this papyrus.

The ad reads as follows: "Wanted: missionary apostles to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. No prior experience necessary. Must be willing to follow orders, endure hazardous conditions, and accept irregular payment. Multiple positions available. Apply in person: half-hearted candidates need not apply."

Okay, maybe I made that up. But you have to wonder: how exactly did Jesus go about recruiting people for this particular mission?

This is not the first preaching tour that's described in Luke's gospel. Before he sent out the seventy, Jesus had sent out his twelve closest disciples on a similar mission. Luke writes that Jesus called together the twelve, gave them power and authority, and gave them these instructions: "Take nothing for your journey, stay wherever you are welcomed, proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick, and don't waste your time with the places that don't welcome you."

That sounds a lot like the mission that he gives to the seventy who are sent out in today's gospel. But something has changed; there are things that happen between the preaching tour of the twelve and the preaching tour of the seventy. The focus and direction of the ministry of Jesus has shifted in some rather important ways.

For example, not long after the twelve disciples returned from that *first* preaching tour, Jesus asks them, "So, who are people saying that I am, and who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter, of course, responds, "You are the messiah of God."

Something else happens between the preaching tour made by the twelve and the preaching tour made by the seventy: Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and goes up a mountain, where he is transfigured before them. And a voice is heard from heaven, "This is my Son; listen to him."

And there's one other very significant thing that happens between the preaching tour of the twelve and the tour made by the seventy: for the first time Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to be betrayed. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the people, and he will be killed; but on the third day he will rise again." This was the first time they'd heard him say anything like that.

All of this is to say that our gospel lesson this morning is part of a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Prior to this, Jesus had spent most of his time in and around Galilee. He had healed the sick, delivered those who were spiritually oppressed, and had taught the people about the kingdom of God. And for a while, everything went quite well.

But then things began to change. Jesus began to find that people were not nearly as responsive to his message as he'd hoped they would be. They were happy to listen to him so long as he said what they wanted to hear, but he didn't always say things they wanted to hear, and they didn't like it when he did that. He found himself increasingly at odds with the religious leaders; they questioned his authority, and they questioned his orthodoxy. And he began to discern that the path to which his Father was calling him was one that would lead him out of Galilee to Jerusalem.

Faced with all of these changes, Jesus switched gears. In last week's gospel, we heard that he "set his face" and began a journey that would take him out of Galilee, through Samaria, and into Judea. One way or another, he was going to see that his Father's will would be done. From this point forward, there is a heightened sense of urgency in everything Jesus says and everything he does. From here on out in Luke's gospel, all roads lead to the cross.

So when Jesus sends out seventy of his disciples on a preaching tour, his intent is not just to tell people about the kingdom of God; his intent is to let people know that the time has come, and the king is on his way. The storm clouds were gathering: the lines were being drawn, and the final battle was about to be fought.

This is what's behind the word of judgment he speaks against the towns that had rejected his teaching. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! Woe to you, Capernaum! You had your chance," he tells them, "but you rejected it; you were offered life, but you have chosen death. So be it."

This sense of imperative, this sense of approaching conflict, this is also what's behind the cryptic comment Jesus makes about seeing Satan fall from heaven like lightning. In his own ministry, Jesus had seen the powers of darkness suffer a series of defeats. Now through the ministry of his disciples, the powers of darkness continued their retreat. The time was coming when the powers of darkness would be decisively overthrown and the reign of God would begin. Jesus is beginning his final offensive.

Now, all of this raises some questions. First question: why does Jesus have to be so intense about all this? Why couldn't he have moderated his message a bit so that more people would have responded? All this stuff about wiping the dust off of one's feet and being brought down to Hades and Satan falling like lightning—all of that sounds a little extreme, maybe even a little fanatical. Couldn't Jesus have toned it down just a little?

Second question: if Jesus came to inaugurate the reign of God, where is God now? Why doesn't God seem to have done anything about the problems that have continued to plague the world ever since the time of Jesus? If Satan has fallen like lightning from heaven and the disciples of Jesus have been given authority over all the power over the enemy, why does life continue to be

such a struggle?

Let's take each of these questions in turn. First question: why does Jesus have to be so intense about all of this? The reason Jesus is so committed to the reign of God has everything to do with the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of the gift of God's salvation. In other words, there are no half-measures in the kingdom of God; God intends to save all of us, and by all of us I mean *every one* of us and I mean every *part* of us. Every person, regardless of who they are and what they've done, is invited to accept the gift of God's salvation; the harvest is indeed *very* plentiful.

Likewise, every part of our being needs to be grounded in the transformative grace and power of God. There is no dimension of our lives that is not open to the transformative power of the gospel. Our hearts, our minds, our wills, our bodies, our families, our relationships, our work, our play, our time, our money—you name it, God wants it.

And the reason God wants it is not because *God* needs it but because *you* need it: you need it to do the work God gives you to do. God has called *you* to be a laborer in his harvest. Jesus himself has appointed *you* and has sent you ahead of him: just as he said to his disciples, so too does he say to us, "Time to get off the bench and into the game. Get out there: get out there and proclaim the gospel, cure the sick, deliver the oppressed, raise the dead. Get out there and use the authority I have given you to do my work in the world."

But it's hard, isn't it? It's a struggle. That brings us to our second question: if Jesus came to inaugurate the reign of God in the world, why does it so often seem so difficult? What difference has it really made?

Think for a moment about the expectations the people of Jesus' day had about the messiah: when the messiah came, what would happen? The justice and the righteousness of God would be manifest amongst God's people; the worship of the true God in the temple at Jerusalem would be renewed; Israel would be freed from political and social bondage to Rome. Many in Israel had very specific, very concrete, and very reasonable expectations about what the reign of God would look like.

The first Christians proclaimed that in Jesus all of Israel's expectations had been fulfilled. They weren't fulfilled in the way many in Israel *expected* they would be fulfilled, but they had indeed been fulfilled; Jesus was the prophet, the priest, and the king for whom Israel had waited. Part of what happened with the coming of God's anointed messiah was that Israel had to learn to adjust its expectations about how God was going to fulfill his promises.

The same is true for us; we'd prefer a God who swoops in and saves us from our problems, who sets the world to rights and fulfills our expectations as to how things should be. But just as Israel had to learn to adjust its expectations in light of the coming of the messiah, so too does our growth in the life of faith involve learning to adjust the expectations we have about how God works in our lives. It's not that God is not up to dealing with the brokenness of our lives; it's just that God is determined to deal with these things on *his* terms and not on *our* terms, and the terms God uses are always intended to draw us deeper into the life of faith.

All of the promises and all of the challenges that Jesus gave to his disciples, he gives to us as well. We too are sent out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom, and we go forth like sheep into the midst of wolves. We are called to travel light, and we are called to stay focused on our task. We must be willing to follow where God leads us, we must be ready to endure hazardous conditions, and we should not expect that everyone will welcome our message. But we, too, have been granted authority over the powers of darkness, and Jesus has promised to be with us wherever we go.

So let us go forth boldly and declare that the kingdom of God has come near, and let us proclaim the salvation that God has given to us and to the world in his anointed messiah, Jesus. Amen.

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