

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 13, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B, Proper 6: Ezekiel 31:1-6, 10-14; Psalm 92:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10;*

*Mark 4:1-2a, 9-12, 26-34**

In 1971, the British-born New Testament scholar Reginald Fuller began writing a series of articles for the journal *Worship* to introduce the then-new three-year *Lectionary for Mass* adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969. It's the basis for most lectionaries in the Christian West. Dr. Fuller was a priest of the Church of England. After taking a position at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, he was received as a priest of the Episcopal Church. He would go on to teach at Union Theological Seminary here in the city. In 1972, he became professor of New Testament at the Virginia Theological Seminary, from which he retired in 1985. The articles were published as a book in 1974 called *Preaching the New Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*.¹

The collection begins with Lent of Year C in 1971. Year A followed in at the end of November 1971, Year B on the first Sunday in December 1972. Introducing Year B, he wrote, "In Year B, the gospel readings are taken from Mark, supplemented by John. This is necessary because since Mark's gospel is the shortest it requires supplementing."² With respect, there are other factors at play. Roman Catholic beliefs about the Eucharist mean that we have one Sunday in Lent and four Sundays in August to hear almost all of the sixth chapter of John, Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. As a result, the lectionary omits a great deal of Mark during Year B.

In his commentary on Mark, Mark Searle quoted the late Ernst Käsemann, a German Lutheran scholar. Käsemann wrote that Mark was all about

¹ Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the New Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1974).

² *Ibid.*, 282.

“clearing the earth of demons.”³ So next Sunday, the not-short story of the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac from Mark is a “suggested lengthening.” But given the concerns of the evangelist, perhaps it should have been included. Some years we use it, some we don’t, depending on the preacher’s preference for the sermon.

Today’s gospel consists of excerpts from what we call Mark’s fourth chapter. The parables we read today are about the growth of seeds. These two parables are used with young children to encourage their sense of wonder about themselves and God.

Today we did not hear the parable that introduces what we did hear, the parable of the sower who went out to sow. The disciples do not understand what they have heard. Instead in private, Jesus explains to them what this parable means. He says that some of a person’s seeds fall on the path and do not grow. Some fall on rocky ground. These seeds begin to grow, but because the soil is not deep, they wither. Other seeds are sown among thorns. Jesus explains, “They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”⁴

In the person of Jesus, God is healing the sick, casting out demons, and feeding thousands who hunger. God oversees the unfolding of God’s dominion over Satan. The unfolding is underway.

Three times Jesus tells his disciples about the suffering and death he will face in Jerusalem.⁵ As he dies, the earth will be in darkness. The suffering will be real. The crucified Son of God will die with the words from a psalm. This translation is Raymond Brown’s, “And at the ninth hour Jesus

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 190.

⁴ Mark 4:17–20.

⁵ Mark 8:31–38; 9:30–32; 10:33–34.

screamed with a loud cry . . . ‘My God, my God, for what reason have you forsaken me?’ . . . But Jesus, having let go a loud cry expired.”⁶

My New Testament Greek dictionary gives this definition of the Greek verb here, “ἐκπνέω”—to “breathe out one’s life soul, expire, [a] euphemism for die.”⁷ There was nothing gentle about his death. In the background of Mark’s telling of parables is the struggle between the dominion of Satan and the dominion of God in the life of Mark’s community. People hear the Word, but it doesn’t always bear fruit. Many who begin to believe drift away. The existence of this gospel text suggests that the faithful members of the community are, in Professor Marcus’ words, “are already participating in the glory of God’s dominion on earth, as symbolized by the mustard seed.”⁸ It reminds me of Paul’s words about his weakness and suffering. In his weakness, God’s strength still shines; Paul doesn’t like to suffer, but he does so gladly for the sake of others.⁹

Yesterday was the twelfth of June. Five years ago, the twelfth of June was a Sunday. In the early hours of that day, Omar Mateen entered Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. Saturday was Latino night. We awoke to the news that Mateen had killed 49 people and wounded 53 others.¹⁰ The first of October in 2017 was also a Sunday. That night, Stephen Paddock from his hotel room in Las Vegas shot and killed sixty people and wounded 411. Hundreds more were also injured from the panic that ensued.¹¹ It’s not clear why these men became mass murderers. But both came from very troubled childhood homes. Each made choices that led them to become

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (Doubleday: New York, 1994), II:1031.

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἐκπνέω,” 308.

⁸ Marcus, 323–24, 329–31.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:5–7.

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2016/06/16/482322488/orlando-shooting-what-happened-update>, (accessed 13 June 2021).

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/29/689821599/fbi-finds-no-motive-in-las-vegas-shooting-closes-investigation>, (accessed 13 June 2021).

instruments of evil. I don't think we ever really make peace in our souls with evil that takes away life, especially of the lives of persons we know, persons we love. We wake every morning to news of murders being committed in too many places.

I close with the first verse of a hymn we sing—when we are allowed to sing. The English poet Robert Bridges made “a free version of a hymn by Joachim Neander”—a seventeenth-century German Reformed pastor. The tune was written by Herbert Howells and named in memory of his son Michael who died in childhood.¹²

*All my hope on God is founded
He doth still my trust renew,
Me through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.¹³*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, ed. Raymond F. Glover (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), Vol. 3 B, Hymn 665.

¹³ *The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), Hymn 665.