

A Question of Authority

sermon digest

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Luke 20:1-8

carolyn dipboye

Lent, as we have said many times, is a journey. We take it to be a solemn journey, and it is. It is a journey during which we seek to look more deeply into ourselves and into our world, not as author Sarah Parsons reminds us, that “we may criticize ourselves more harshly but so we can identify the obstructions that keep us from God.” Lent provides us with an opportunity to consider those obstacles in our lives and “move them gently away so that we can come closer to the Love that gives us life, the Love whose triumph we will celebrate on Easter morning” [A Clearing Season, 2005].

At bottom, Lent is a journey with the Christ. It is a journey, as our Grace Chorale will sing in a couple of weeks, “to the cross . . . on to the cross.” Picture the days of Lent, if you will, as a drama—a drama in which we seek to become actors. We turn our faces with Jesus toward Jerusalem; and we journey solemnly and reflectively with him to the cross. That very journey, you see, is foundational to our faith. It is not a trip taken flippantly, lightly, thoughtlessly. It is a trip taken with all seriousness as if that which matters most is at stake. It is the journey upon which each of the first three Gospels turns. Jesus, the Gospel of Luke says, “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:52). Almost two thirds of Luke’s Gospel unfolds from that moment, for that trip and what happens along the way and in Jerusalem reveal who this Jesus was and is.

Along the way, we hear Jesus’ soulful lament: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (13:34) And then, Luke says, as Jerusalem came into view, Jesus “wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!’” (19:42) Entering the temple, he “began” Luke says, “to drive out those who were selling things there.” (19:46). And from that point on, he was “everyday . . . teaching in the temple . . . [and] all the people were spellbound by what they heard” (47).

“By what authority are you doing these things?” the chief priests, scribes and elders challenge him. “Who is it who gave you this authority?” (20:2). It was a question, the Gospels tell us, Jesus had met before and would meet again. The crowds had been moved by his authority. They had wondered at his ability to “teach as one who had authority.” They had marveled at the authority with which he had cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead. But he wasn’t in Galilee any more. Things had changed. He had moved off of the home turf of Galilee and into the territory occupied by those with incredible credentials. Chief priests, descended from the tribe of Levi, knew where their authority resided—in their genealogy. The scribes, educated by the best teachers of the day, could still any question of credentials by pointing to the acclaimed men at whose feet they had studied. And no one questioned the rightful claim to authority made by the elders. Coming from the most powerful families in Jerusalem, they could presume upon an economic and social status that no one could dispute. But the authority of this one who came from Galilee, of all places? The authority of this one who “spoke as one who had authority,” doing so without any outward claim of authority other than the remarkable insight with which he spoke? This one who had the audacity (and seemingly the ability) to cast out demons and forgive people their sins? This one whose very entrance into town had created something of an uproar, not to mention the audacity with which he presumed to “begin” cleansing the temple with his own peculiar brand of teaching? Who was he? What claim did he have for “doing these things”?

We tend to cluck our tongues, to talk long and self-righteously about “those Jews” who couldn’t see what was right before their eyes. *They*, we say, were so caught up in their legalism. *Theirs* was an outward show of religion. *They* had to win their salvation by living up to their laws. *They* were so proud of their presumed exclusive claim on God, their mastery of the law, their proud temple tradition that they knew not the one who stood before them. How blind *they* were. (And to the side, much like the publican who went to the temple to pray, how glad *we* are that we are not like them!)

Before we get too self-righteous, too certain that their weakness is not our weakness, let’s stop and think for a moment. How would we respond to someone coming in from the country and ensconcing himself or herself on the steps of a local megachurch, the pride of the city? Or perhaps, more to the point, on the steps of our denominational offices? Or worse, on the courthouse steps?

Or, heaven forbid, on the campus of ORNL or Y-12? Before we throw stones at the blindness of first century Jews, we should consider the beam in our own eye. How do we discern where truth lies? How do we gauge the words proclaimed among us? How do we gauge the authenticity of the speaker? Particularly if that speaker is calling us to repentance and change?

The question of authority is not and was not something new. The prophets of Israel had repeatedly pointed toward the new thing that God would do in their midst. They had expended great energy in saying what that new thing would look like, both for the sake of raising the people's hope in the midst of suffering and of helping them be prepared to recognize the new day when it appeared. Isaiah, speaking in the shadow of the fomentations of the great Assyrian empire, described the darkness that had fallen upon the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali in the Northern Kingdom. Caught in the grip of brutality, poverty and hunger at the hands of their captors, theirs was a land without hope. Wesley Theological Seminary Professor Amy Oden describes their situation:

A conquered people, subject to the whims and demands of overlords, are powerless. Security and safety are stripped away. Every asset will be usurped by the conquerors. Every child born can be taken by the more powerful into slavery. Every field planted with crops can be harvested by the mighty. Every hope for the future is stolen by masters who have the final say.

"This," she says, "is the land of deep darkness" upon whom God's light of hope will shine in the birth of a child to usher in a kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness.

And again, Second Isaiah, speaking to a people suffering in exile, proclaims the character of God's new day: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me . . . to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (61:1). These are the words, you will remember, Luke places on Jesus' lips as he announces his ministry in Nazareth (4:18).

More than pretty words about the tiny baby we celebrate at Christmas, the child born to us in Isaiah ushers in a particular sort of new day. And these are the evidences that the child is one come from God: the new birth of a society of peace, justice and righteousness in which the oppressed hear good news, those who mourn are comforted, and those who are held in the clutches of injustice are freed. These, Isaiah says and Luke echoes, are the evidences, the authentication of one who comes in the name of the Lord.

I don't know if you were like me when you opened the *Oak Ridger* a few weeks ago and read the headline proclaiming an effort afoot in our county to "bring God back to the courthouse." It's okay if you read it differently; but for myself, I groaned deeply inside, for I saw before us a heated battle. I envisioned angry, accusing speech and angry faces lined up, neighbor against neighbor, as some within our community sought to protect God and re-establish God as a visible presence among us. I groaned thinking of the prophet Jeremiah's words, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" More than presuming upon buildings, more than presuming upon God's favor, this, Jeremiah says, is how you honor and authenticate the presence of God in your midst:

If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place (7:7).

More than any words on a building, our lives, our dealings with our neighbors, our treatment of the alien, the orphan, and the widow bear witness to the God we would serve. More than covering the doors of the courthouse with a proclamation of faith that both those who share our faith and those who do not must pass under in order to pursue business and seek justice, we would do well to turn our attention to the respect and care of our neighbors.

"Are you the one who is to come?" John languishing in prison, sent messengers to ask of Jesus. In other words, "Authenticate yourself. Give us some evidence of who and whose you are."

Having just cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, Luke says, Jesus, reaching back to the preaching of the prophets who had preceded him, answered: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22).

“You want evidence that God is with me?” Jesus asked. “Look around you and see who is being healed, who is being freed from captivity and injustice, who is being warmed, fed and clothed, who is being welcomed as brother or sister.”

Do we want to be able to detect the authenticity of those we encounter in society speaking in God’s name? Do we want to bear witness ourselves to the presence of God among us? Here is the way recommended by Israel’s prophets and by Jesus himself: Look around and see what is happening to and among our neighbors because we are here. Then and only then will we know the authenticity of our claims.

Peace, justice, freedom, healing, and the leveling of walls of hostility and discrimination—these are the signs to which we should be attentive. They were good enough for Jesus. They should be good enough for those of us who would serve in his name.