

St. Anne's Church
Proper 9C July 7
July 7, 2013

I

Another "Hole in the Bible." And just in case you never heard of a "Hole in the Bible," don't fret; I just made it up. Holes in the Bible don't really exist in the Bible; they are perversions of lectionary editors, who, for some reason or another, don't want us to read some portion of a biblical text in worship. Lectionaries, however, and Sunday bulletins print the lesson as though the missing text were never there in the first place.

It may be too much to ask someone, clergy or lay, to say Maher-shalal-hash-baz once, let alone twice (Isaiah 8:1, 3) without choking, so I understand the temptation to throw it down the lectionary hole along with the gloom-and-doom predictions of the fall of Damascus and Samaria. But sometimes the Hole in the Bible just carries away the most important thing. That's what happened in our Gospel lesson for today, and here is what was thrown down the hole:

10:13 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. 14 But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 15 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. (NRSV)

Without these real places with the real people that lived in them, there is no substance to a story about unknown towns populated with unknown people. If the fires of Sdom are really going to fall again from heaven, then they need to fall where we can see them or at least imagine them.

II

These seventy students of our Lord, you see, were going on an educational road trip, an Outward Bound experience of sorts: no purse, no bag, no sandals. All you may take with you is news of a kingdom, good news of God's love. And whether you limp back here hungry and with your feet bloody or well fed and excited really isn't up to you."

What the Seventy would encounter in the towns of the Galilee would provide this education. The folks of Nazareth and Magdala, Nain and Cana, wouldn't put them in jail or beat them up; they would probably just ignore them—and for good reason. They would ignore them because they weren't about to fall for those luscious, extravagant hopes of a Kingdom of God again. They would ignore the Seventy because hard experience told them that such messengers were always self-deluded. They had heard it all before, from Essenes and Pharisees, and from that wing-nut Baptist guy. But the preachers and the evangelists, the rabbis and the other apocalyptic crazy people always went away, always left them right where they had begun: back to their seven-day work weeks with no Sabbath rest, back to the tax collectors and other thieves, back to a not-quite brutish existence with no messianic kingdom or messiah to change anything. These are not wicked people, just *am ha-arets*, "people of the land," people who have to work instead of dream.

III

That's what the Seventy should plan on hearing when they go to the Jewish towns of the Galilee. Maybe some will receive the messengers, but not many. This educational opportunity, however, this field trip is for the Seventy as much as it is for the people of the Galilee. The denials and protestations they would hear in Nain or Magdala would be a sounding-board of their own doubts and protestations; and it would be those voices from inside that would need answering first.

That's what you and I should expect to happen in Clemmons or at Hanes Mall. Jesus' warning about Sdom and about Hades is something we need to take as seriously as did the Galileans of Roman Palestine. And the reason is clear: When that polite despair of the *am ha-arets* takes us over completely, when hope has disappeared and one day looks pretty much like the last, there's not much left for an apostle of hope to do.

The polite cynicism those Seventy had to face is still very much alive in our community and in us. The members of the Legislature have just taken food from children's mouths and teachers from their classrooms with fine words about budget balancing and financial responsibility. They have left behind thousands in poverty and ignorance.

In Raleigh's Central Prison, the legalized killing of people of color can now resume, thanks to repeal of the Racial Justice Act. Proof of jury bias can now go back to being just as irrelevant as it was when the Lumbee Indians chased off the Klan. But this time, everyone is so genteel about it with unctuous words about "justice for victims" as if killing somehow brought justice and peace to victims. It seems that when the prophets leave, when for a glorious moment we see light, things return to a dismal normality.

I see the fingers of despair and resignation choking me every bit as much as they are choking the members of the Legislature and the judges and prosecutors of our justice system. That cynicism in me is my familiar Chorazin and Capernaum. The *am ha-arets* of Bethabara and Winston-Salem won't need additional fire and brimstone, I venture, because we already have that conflagration in the form of spoiled dreams and defeated hopes.

Do I have it in me to fight Jim Crow once more, to carry signs or to get arrested. We won the right for all of us to vote in 1965, didn't we? Now that right has evaporated, erased with a few polite words from the Supreme Court. We may not see poll taxes or literacy tests again for a while, but picture IDs and reduced registration and voting opportunities will do the job for now. What did all our brave hopes and youthful exuberances really gain?

The mission of the Seventy was to come to believe again, to hope again, to love again and then to show the people of the Arbel and the Decapolis and Winston-Salem that neither North Carolina legislators nor quisling Herodians can defeat God's promises. No emperor or governor can finally resist the power of God. No court can declare God's law void. The love of God can and will break down these new dividing walls of segregation just as that love assailed the old walls a half century ago.

I doubt the Seventy were any more ready to go on their field trip than I am, but they went. Whatever in their hearts told them that the kingdom was just a fantasy and the justice of that kingdom a farce was not enough to keep these people-of-the-land-turned disciples from going where Jesus had sent them. There they would meet *am ha-arets* like them and would come

to know that the faith-as-courage they had found within themselves could also be found in Chorazin and in Capernaum, in Lewisville and in Walburg.

It's OK to wear sandals this time, just wear them where you can do some good: Kids Kafé or the Augustine Project, school board meetings and meetings of the county commissioners.

We don't have to submit to the quiet horror of hunger. You, St. Anne's, can go to Crisis Control and the Food Bank and bring with you copious, nourishing food for hungry people, and then you can urge the rebuilding of a society that doesn't depend on the sometimes good intentions of others but on civic fairness and compassion. Take your voices to whatever demonstration the Lord calls you to attend. Hold up signs, sing and be obnoxious, living examples of the hope that is in you.

Jesus sent the Seventy out not to preach the Gospel but to be the Gospel. It's time in our generation to experience our own field trip into God's future, to be the Good News now.

Amen