

**Sermon for Sunday, July 9, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

Today's gospel  
is perhaps not the part of one's biography  
that we would have chosen  
to share.

Jesus  
is well on his way in his ministry.  
He's selected his twelve apostles.  
He's taught them  
and then sent them out  
to proclaim the good news  
and to heal.  
But in Matthew's telling of the story, at least,  
there's no report  
on when they came back,  
and if they did  
it's not with the excitement  
that Luke records.  
It seems more like  
they've slunk back in,  
mingling with the crowds  
in the cities where Jesus has gone  
to preach the gospel,  
and it's John the Baptist's followers  
who are up front,  
passing on a message from their leader  
because he's stuck in prison and can't come see for himself.  
"Are you the one who is to come,  
the Messiah who we've been preparing for,  
or is there someone else  
we should be waiting for?"

And Jesus answers  
in his usual circuitous manner.  
Instead of simply saying, "Yes,"  
he tells them

to go tell their leader  
what they've seen.  
“The blind receive their sight,  
the lame walk,  
the lepers are cleansed,  
the deaf hear,  
the dead are raised,  
and the poor have good news brought to them.”

And of course,  
if they know their bibles,  
they would recognize those words  
from Isaiah chapter 61,  
the words Jesus preached on  
in the synagogue in Nazareth  
when he first began his time  
as a traveling teacher and healer.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent 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;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,

And scattered before that  
all through the book Isaiah,  
the book that John the Baptist himself  
is reported as constantly quoting.

And it's then,  
as they leave to take his message back to John  
that Jesus begins to talk to the crowds,  
and it's pretty clear  
from what he says  
that he's more than a little frustrated with them.

Because most of them, it seems,  
are no better than sightseers.

The come out to see him  
just like they came out to see John the Baptist.  
Anything  
for some entertainment.  
“Did you come to see a king?  
Or a prophet?  
And if you came to see a prophet  
didn’t you listen  
to anything  
he said?  
All you have  
are complaints.”

“John was too strange.  
He lived off by himself,  
didn’t mix much.  
His choice of food was strange.  
He didn’t belong.  
There must have been something wrong with him.  
He can’t have been from God.  
He must have been  
possessed.”

And it is the same with Jesus himself.  
Except he  
is the opposite of John.  
He travels among them,  
he and his band of apostles,  
staying with whoever will welcome him.  
Spending time talking  
with whoever shows up.  
Eating meals  
with anyone  
who invites him, regardless of who they are.  
He’s not picky.

He’s the opposite of John the Baptist  
in so many ways,  
but still they have complaints.  
“He must be a drunkard and glutton, he mixes with the wrong people.

There must be something wrong with him.  
He can't be from God."

No matter what John the Baptist does,  
no matter what Jesus does,  
all they have are complaints;  
all they have  
are excuses.

And you'll notice  
that our lectionary  
skips over a few verses here.  
Probably  
because Jesus is criticizing  
the cities he has visited,  
and we don't like to hear Jesus  
saying negative things.  
But I think these verses  
are important  
in helping us understand  
what Jesus is heading.

Here they are.

Then [Jesus] began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. "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 in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you."

Jesus has been preaching, teaching, healing,  
in these cities,  
all the things  
that he's done everywhere else.  
And the response has been...  
nothing.

Well, nothing  
except complaints.  
Complaints  
that have become excuses.

Because that's what they are, really.  
"John the Baptist is too strange.  
He can't be from God.  
He must be possessed.  
So I can't possibly  
take what he says  
seriously."

"Jesus enjoys life too much.  
He mixes with the wrong people.  
That doesn't look like a holy man to me.  
So I can't possibly  
take what he says  
seriously."

Complaints  
that have become excuses.

Excuses.  
Excuses not to listen,  
excuses not to respond,  
excuses not  
to follow  
Jesus.

And then, as the chapter ends,  
after a brief excursus of prayer,  
then  
Jesus offers the most gracious,  
grace-filled  
invitation.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

It's a part of scripture that we find in our prayer book,  
in Rite 1, after the confession,  
and it's traditionally known  
as one of the "Comfortable Words."

And in many ways, it is.  
These are words of welcome,  
words of love,  
words that we most want to hear  
when we are struggling  
and feeling exhausted.  
A promise  
of rest.

But that's only part  
of what Jesus says.

Because there's those few words in the middle  
about a yoke.

A yoke  
in Jesus' time  
is the same as it is today - though it's not something we see particularly often  
here in St James! -  
is a wooden crosspiece  
that's fastened over the necks of two animals - cattle or donkeys or even horses -  
that allows them to work together to pull a plow or a cart.  
They share the load.

Jesus says,  
"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."

So here's the picture Jesus seems to be painting.  
Here we are coming along, tired, and struggling with our suitcases,  
and Jesus calls out,  
"Come over here! I'll give you a rest."  
And so we go over, thinking he has a redcap for us,  
or at least a luggage trolley,

only to discover  
that what he has  
is one of those baggage carts  
that they use to take all the luggage out to the plane,  
and it's already pretty much loaded.  
And while there's usually something like a heavy duty golf cart that hauls it,  
this time  
there's just a hitch  
and Jesus has one side  
and he wants us to take the other.  
And he's trying to tell us  
that if we join him,  
it won't be as much work as just carrying our own suitcases?

I don't think so.  
We're not stupid.  
We'd prefer  
to keep hold of our own suitcases  
than take on everyone's else's as well!

So I've probably  
over dramatized this.

But sometimes  
we are a little like the people in those cities  
that Jesus was preaching too.  
We hear what he says,  
but we're just not quite willing  
to believe him.  
Not a hundred percent.  
And so we find our excuses.  
Can't be true.  
Not sure we can trust him.  
Not sure  
we want to take the risk.

But Jesus, Jesus promises us  
that if we do,  
even though it might feel as though  
taking on his yoke,

sharing in him with the work he has to do,  
and that he has given us to do,  
taking that on  
is adding to our burdens,  
if we do,  
he will give us rest.

It's kind of like, if we took Jesus at his word with the baggage cart,  
and took the other side of the hitch, and began to pull,  
and discovered  
that it was unexpectedly easy, unexpectedly light.

The rest Jesus promises  
is not the rest  
of a vacation  
or the rest  
of retirement.  
This is the rest  
of bringing ourselves, every gift we have  
and every burden we carry  
to Jesus,  
and finding that as we walk alongside him and learn from him,  
our souls are refreshed and blessed.

What you find when you read the biographies  
of great men and women of faith,  
people who did come to him  
and take on his yoke,  
is that what they discovered  
is that their burdens did get lighter.  
Sometimes  
because there were so many others there to help carry them.  
Sometimes  
because they realized they didn't actually need to be carrying them in the first time.  
Sometimes, even because they found that carrying them in the company of others -  
and in the company of Jesus -  
was just a whole lot easier.

Many of us feel burdened.  
Like can be hard.

But what if, what if all of us - all of us -  
said to Jesus,  
“I’m willing to give it a try?”

What is the yoke  
that Jesus is offering us?  
What is the work  
that Jesus wants us to do?  
How might you  
be part of it?  
How might you  
enter Christ’s rest?