

One of the things that we often miss in this lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke -- our reading this morning--is a sense of context and setting. And the setting here is important.

Just before this passage, Jesus has spent long hours in prayer. Luke makes it seem like this was a periodic practice when he says *In these days he went out into the hills to pray*. Just before this particular day, which will include his sermon on the plain, Jesus has spent the entire night in prayer. This reminds us of Jesus spending the entire night in prayer just before his arrest and crucifixion. It reminds us of the power of prayer to ground us, prepare us, provide us perspective, open up channels of healing and awareness. Prayer in the midst of stress, in the midst of critical junctures, in the midst of ordinary days. Prayer to open us up. Prayer as presentation before the divine Mystery.

Prayer is not optional if we are to live with a grounded perspective. The Expositor's Greek Testament points out that Luke especially presents Jesus as a "devotional Model, often praying and especially at critical times in his life."

And this moment before us from Luke's Gospel this morning is critical.

Stepping into the light of day from long hours in prayer through the night, the first action of Jesus is to call the disciples. He calls what appears to be a crowd of disciples and names twelve – twelve apostles.

An apostle is distinctive. Luke uses this word six times—more than Matthew or Mark. An apostle is distinctively claimed by Jesus as a special chosen one. Apostles are emissaries, bearers of the message; twelve just like the twelve tribes claimed by YHWH in a covenant relationship. There are three social strata here:

1. Apostles, 2. a large number of disciples, 3. a crowd from Jerusalem, Judea, even from the seacoast. This crowd has come focused both on touching (touching to be healed) and on being in the presence of Jesus and therefore also focused on hearing

his words. Jesus is presented as a vessel of healing power. And indeed, a savior is a healer. A savior is one who can bind up wounds and heal past differences. A savior is one who presents transformative power. It is almost as if Jesus is a capacitor of healing power, charged power held within him. And people with fear and faith crowd around him just for a touch.

And then Jesus turns directly to the disciples and in the midst of this huge gathering suggesting a universal audience and purpose; in the midst of apostles, disciples and a diverse crowd of peoples, Jesus begins to teach. And he does so on a level plain.

A level plain. Jesus comes down from the hills and stands on a level plain. The hills suggest the presence of YHWH – El Shaddai—God of the mountains. In Matthew this vertical relationship is emphasized as Jesus preaches what we know as The Sermon on the Mount. But here the trajectory is more horizontal than vertical, more inclusive of great and diverse humanity.

The level plain has two distinctive meanings. First, in the Hebrew scriptures, it often is the place of the world, a difficult and various place indeed. The scholar Ronald Allen cites passages from Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel, Habakkuk, and Zechariah. These prophets present the level plain as a place of “corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning.” And he writes: “Jesus teaches the way of the Realm in the midst of the world as such a level place.” Blessings and curses. Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God// Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Woe to you that are full now for you shall hunger.

Jesus is proclaiming an eschatological realm. It is a realm outside of our normal vision and it is filled with radical understandings and perspective. In the language of ancient times with so many living out their days in the face of grinding poverty, separated by such a huge gulf from the ruling classes, this approaching realm is described in the most powerful terms. It is a Kingdom. A Kingdom of God who is coming to rule and heal and set free. A Kingdom of peace and restorative justice.

This is what is coming. This is what the crowds need to see, so hungry and so desperate. This is what the disciples and the chosen few alike need to understand. These teachings are not platitudes, some exalted sentiments made to be understood from a distance. No... However, difficult it may be, these are teachings made to claim us. To claim us in the midst of level plain living, the place of idolatry, the place of suffering, the difficult places of our living. The Gospel is intended for the reality of the world. And here Jesus presents the Gospel on the level plain.

But there is also a second meaning to “level plain.” And that meaning is “glory.” Isaiah and Ezekiel both point to the glory of YHWH, the Lord, also existing in that corrupt and ordinary level plain. Second Isaiah (chapter forty) begins with *comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem* and not many verses later we read:

**In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together.**

It is in the midst of the level plain that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. In the midst of spiritual wilderness, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of desperate longings, in the midst of disconnects – *here* the glory is to be revealed. *Here* life is to be lived. *Here* the cost of discipleship is to be borne. *Here* the depths of spiritual blessing are to be conferred.

Just ahead this point becomes more clear as Luke records more of Jesus’ teachings:

*But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

Dr. Allen writes: “As the text unfolds, of course, the question becomes, ‘How do *we* manifest the values and practices of the Realm in the midst of the level places of life?’”

**‘How do we ...?’**

**Do we have the capacity to see with eyes of faith beyond the current circumstances in which we find ourselves? Do we see that this time and place and circumstance (whatever it is) in which we live is the very place where the glory is revealed and to be seen? Do we see that this is the time and place for us to understand that here and now we are followers, we are disciples, we are called to live with a kind of gritty faith that asks to be put to work.**

**Send us out to live and serve you, we pray, with gladness and singleness of heart. Purposeful. Focused. Claimed. Sent.**

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**In our first lesson, the prophet Jeremiah writes:**

**7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. 8 They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.**

**And Jesus teaches:**

**22 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.**

**Both the prophet and Jesus our Lord give advice intended for living in a place full of challenge and difficulty. But they also remind us that this place can also be (because of the presence of God) a blessed place --a place of blessing and glory, a fruitful place.**

**It is here where our real faith has to be formed, our best values lived out. It is here where we can be a people of prayer and expectation-- a people of faith and love.**

**May we have the strength to stand on the level plain. May we be like Jesus grounded in prayer. And especially through prayer may we find the grace to see beyond limitation, suffering or difficulty the shining presence of the Spirit of the Living God, the Most High.**

**In the name of G-d—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**