

Matthew 9:35-38

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

I wonder if the first line of our scripture passage today struck anyone else as irritating? It goes like this, "Jesus went about all the cities and villages..." He is out in the world with people, moving freely through the towns, gathering in crowds, talking to people (surely closer than 6 feet apart), touching people, eating with them! –all these things that, until this last week or so, we took for granted.

It's irritating to hear about anyone moving freely through the world now that we are hunkered down in our own houses, social distancing, quarantining. And, it is comforting, to me, to think of Jesus now, going about Madison and all the towns and cities, visiting people, meeting people, touching people, being present, connecting in ways that we cannot right now.

The writer of Matthew says that when Jesus saw the people, he was filled with compassion for them, because they were "harassed and helpless." What an apt description of how we feel right now, living in all this uncertainty, watching the news change hour by hour, trying to get a grasp on what is happening and what it really means.

Harassed and helpless going to the grocery store and seeing rows of empty shelves, hearing about people fighting over toilet paper, gun sales rocketing in anticipation of impending chaos.

Harassed and helpless trying to grasp the economic toll of this pandemic, wondering how long money will last, thinking of those who have lost jobs, who are already out of food or money.

Harassed and helpless learning of loved ones who are infected or might be, and not being able to be near them.

Harassed and helpless being closed in the house with family or isolated and alone – grieving the loss of routines and conversations and outlets that gave our days meaning and structure.

The kids are home from school and we've been making modest attempts at keeping some learning going and I can tell you I feel harassed and helpless just looking at their math problems and trying to figure out how they teach math these days, not to mention suddenly becoming in-home teachers as well as working-from-home parents.

It's overwhelming and surreal, it's frightening, and there is not much we can do to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

When Jesus sees the people – us -harassed and helpless, he is moved with compassion. It is the same compassion we have been talking about the last few weeks. The compassion the father has for the prodigal son when he sees him at last returning home. The compassion the good Samaritan has for his enemy lying half-dead in a ditch. It is a compassion that is felt in the gut and compels one to act. Jesus is moved with this compassion, when he sees us.

This compassion keeps showing up in scripture because it is powerful. It has the power to transform situations, transform problems into opportunities for life to continue and flourish, even in unexpected and undeserved ways. The father's compassion for the prodigal son gives him a future where he had none. The Samaritan's compassion for his enemy restores his life. God's compassion for us as we feel helpless and harassed, and our compassion for one another, has the power to transform our isolation and fear into opportunities for life to continue and flourish in new ways.

The first step is to know that we are loved, that we are met in all our vulnerability with compassion. To allow God's compassion to embrace and hold us, and lift our eyes from the fear.

There was a time, not too long ago, that I was under a lot of stress. It was mostly manifesting as a horrible tightness in my chest. I wasn't sleeping well and was waking up with a blanket of anxiety covering me that was hard to shake the rest of the day. All my tried and true coping mechanisms were failing me; I was feeling more and more lost and overwhelmed. Even though prayer wasn't having the same comforting effect that I was used to, I sat down in a quiet place to pray. I asked God to hold me and give me strength while I tried to pay attention to that horrible tightness in my chest and face the anxiety, in hopes of some relief.

As I sank into prayer, telling God what I felt like in my chest, an image of my heart came to me. It was dark and closed in and filled with these raging waters, like a whirlpool, threatening to pull me in, and I was clinging, white-knuckled, to the edge trying for dear life to hold on and not get sucked under.

I asked God to come and be with me there in the whirlpool and I waited anxiously for God.

Suddenly, and strangely, a window appeared next to the whirlpool and I saw a little bit of ground and it was as though God said, "Just come out and see."

There was a window to the wider world –to fresh air and light, to earth and sky –a whole universe beyond my heart.

Come out and see, God said.

The next few weeks in my prayers I tried to sit at and look out that window that God showed me, and let myself be drawn to a world beyond my fears, a world much bigger than all that spun out of control inside me; a life larger than my own.

I had felt harassed and helpless; and God saw me hanging on for dear life, and filled with compassion, showed me the way.

Jesus said when he saw the crowds they were harassed and helpless *like sheep without a shepherd*. He could see us sheep straying off on our own, caught in raging waters, hiding under rocks, falling off cliffs, unable to find our way. Filled with compassion, Jesus became the Good Shepherd, coming to us, showing us the way, opening up new possibilities for life to continue and flourish.

Many of us are literally sitting at the window these days, looking out on the world but feeling trapped inside, isolated, afraid, anxious. But we are not sheep without a shepherd. We have a shepherd, who is looking on us with compassion and who has the power to shepherd us beyond our fears, transforming our problems into possibilities for new life, even in the midst of a pandemic.

One of the messages that has been passed around social media lately, reminds me to lift my eyes in hope. It reads:

And the people stayed home. And read books and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art and played games, and learned new ways of being and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses and made new choices, and dreamed new images and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed. (Kitty O'Meara)

We are necessarily learning new ways of being, new depths of compassion, new ways to reach out and survive, creativity we didn't know we had, resiliency,

vulnerability and strength. People in Italy are singing with each other from their balconies. Children here are writing positive messages in chalk on their driveways to cheer their neighbors walking by. I saw a basket of free toilet paper left out for anyone who may need it. We're having virtual meet-ups and calling on people we haven't reached out to in a long time. We are learning in a new way, *in our bones*, that we are in this together.

It is frightening and overwhelming and the answer, as we walk through this together, is to look beyond our fear, allow ourselves to be filled with compassion for one another, and reach out as God shepherds us with compassion into new ways of living.

Amen.