

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The lectionary editors left out a dramatic episode in today's reading, which is the calming of the sea, the story in which a storm blows up and the disciples are afraid they'll be drowned, and Jesus commands the sea to be still and it is. Instead, the lectionary editors gave us the situation that caused them to put out in the boat, which was that they needed to get away and rest from all the good work they'd been doing, skipped the calming-of-the-sea, and went to what happened when they landed, which was that they were mobbed by people who needed help, and Jesus went right to work helping them. When you leave out the big miracle story, and just read what we were given for the lectionary, what stands out is that Jesus and the disciples intend to rest, but that the people's need arouses Jesus' compassion—a Greek word that implies that his guts have been grabbed—and he gets right back onto the job. “He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

This “sheep without a shepherd” is coded language. The Hebrew Bible is full of imagery of the leader being the shepherd of his people. In Numbers 27, as Moses prepares to die, he asks God to appoint a new leader for the people, “who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.” The prophet Ezekiel repeatedly uses this metaphor to condemn the current king: “As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.” When Mark tells us that Jesus' guts wrenched with compassion for the people of Galilee because they were like sheep without a shepherd, he's telling us that their leaders were no good and God was not with those leaders. Ezekiel says, “I

will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” The yearning for a messiah is a yearning for a new king David.

So what does Jesus do? He does what he always does, which is to enact the kingdom of God. He takes on the role of shepherd. He goes to the marketplaces, the centers of commerce and governance, and he heals the sick—the weakest, most vulnerable members of society. The shepherd enacts the kingdom of God because of his compassion for the poorly led people. The only reason anybody might complain is that if they’re a leader and they pick up on the implicit criticism. And as we know, there are those people. But for now, Jesus is just doing what Jesus does, enacting the kingdom of God as he had taught his disciples to do as well.

Last week as I was compassionately ministering to Steve in his hour of need, e.g. sitting in the living room schmoozing with him and Mary, he brought up a book he thought I’d enjoy, and Mary went and found it and gave it to me. It’s called *Here If You Need Me* by Kate Braestrupⁱ, and it’s a memoir of her work as a chaplain for the Maine game warden service. Kate Braestrup’s husband was a state trooper who died in a car accident, leaving her and four children. He had planned to study for the ministry, so after his death she attended Bangor Seminary and became as a Unitarian Universalist minister. The game wardens do a lot of searches for missing persons and recovery of bodies after accidents in the wilderness, so their chaplain is often called on to manifest the kingdom of God in situations that challenge the very concept of God. It interests me that she often does so by pointing out all God’s helpers—pointing out where the kingdom of God is being enacted by human beings.

After the body of a young woman who died by suicide was recovered, the woman’s brother asked Kate, “Can the church bury her?” What he meant was, was suicide unforgivable. His sister had recently attended a church where the pastor had preached that suicide was indeed

unforgiveable, and the brother was trying to think through next steps and what was possible.

Kate writes that she told him,

“I don’t know that pastor personally. I don’t know what he knows and doesn’t know about severe clinical depression. Which is what your sister died of.” I placed my authoritative hand on the console between our bucket seats as if it were a pulpit. “Dan,” I said. “Look around.” Obediently he peered through the rain-washed windshield, up the road toward the blurry outlines of half a dozen green trucks.

“The game wardens have been walking in the rain all day, walking through the woods in the freezing rain trying to find your sister. They would have walked all day tomorrow, walked in the cold rain the rest of the week, searching for Betsy, so they could bring her home to you. And if there is one thing I am sure of—one thing I am very, *very* sure of, Dan—it is that God is not *less* kind, *less* committed, or *less* merciful than a Maine game warden.”

Those wardens were just doing their job, but they were doing it with kindness and commitment, which are signs of the kingdom of God. That’s what Kate’s conveying by pointing to them in answer to the question of whether a person who died by suicide still belongs to God.

We don’t know much about God except for what we see in God’s creation and among the beings whom God creates in God’s image. We haven’t died yet, and we don’t have a set of divine revelations that are so transparent and so unquestionably divine that we know exactly what to make of them. When we need to know what the kingdom of God is like, when we need to know how God rather than Caesar intends us to live, we have to find our clues in this world. Jesus was, as Marcus Borg said, a revelation of God in human form. He manifested the kingdom, he manifested God’s intentions for our lives, and his disciples imperfectly and haltingly picked up the pattern and passed it down to us.

Kate Braestrup ends with the story of a search for an elderly woman with dementia. The wardens were in charge, but there were volunteers too. The high school varsity soccer team, some Marines awaiting transshipment to Iraq, inmates from the Downeast Correctional Facility, and just local people. The woman’s son, Jim, in his fifties. Kate does not tell us whether they

found the woman because, she says, this is not a story about success. “Sometimes the wardens, the searchers, the family members—heroes all—must go home without success, without even an explanation of how the failure happened.”

In a true story, the end is never tidy. So I can only give you untidy searchers returning to the firehouse for their lunch. They are tired, cold, and very hungry. They are greeted with platters of lasagna, bowls of coleslaw, tottering piles of oatmeal cookies, and jiggling, jewel-colored Jell-O salads. The odor of damp boots and wet dogs mingles with the scents of fish chowder and fresh biscuits.

When the prisoners from the Downeast Correctional Facility come into the command post to hand in their GPS units, Nate Robertson meets them at the door. He puts his hand on one neon yellow shoulder: “Weren’t you guys with us on the Addison search?” he asks. The man nods, shyly. You guys were great. Thanks for coming.”

Jim [the son] comes back to the firehouse with a heavy heart. He has scratches on his cheek, twigs in his hair, pine needles down his pants, and his mother is still nowhere to be found. Yet he takes in the scene before him, mops the rain from his face, and smiles.

“Look at this,” he says. “Look at this! This is *incredible!*”

The firehouse is filled with people. The old coots in flannel shirts, the middle-aged dog handlers, and the college students with piercings are sharing American chop suey with the state senator and his teenage daughter. The US Marines are comparing blisters with the soccer players, the sheriff’s deputies are breaking bread with the convicts, game wardens share Jell-O with equestrians, the stained-glass artist offers the retired state trooper an oatmeal cookie.

In a little while, they will go back out and search some more. They will try to find a body, living or dead. For now, they are here together, joined in community, bent on the common purpose of love.

“Everyone in the world is here,” the lost woman’s son exclaims. “It’s a miracle!”

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
to spread compassion to those who are far away and those who are near,
to speak for those who are voiceless,
to defend those who are oppressed and abused,
to work for justice for those who are exploited,
to make peace for those who suffer violence,
to take the time to recognize our connectedness,
and to love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
and to be faithful to the calling you gave us
to be shepherds in your name.

ⁱ Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2007.