

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
February 13, 2022  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Psalm 1  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

## **Mainly in the Plain**

Two weeks ago, inspired by a medley of selections from “My Fair Lady” that will be part of the Keys Choral Arts spring concert, Becky suggested that we watch the film version of that classic musical.

I have seen scenes from “My Fair Lady” and heard songs from this movie my entire life. To the best of my knowledge, however, I had never seen the film.

The movie, which was released on Christmas Day 1964, has been restored and is visually stunning as well as musically appealing. It's also almost three hours long. Since we only have about an hour's worth of video viewing in us each evening, we turned the movie musical into a miniseries and watched about an hour of it each night for three nights.

Among the famous tunes associated with the film and the stage play by Lerner and Loewe upon which it's based is the one that declares, “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain!”

“The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain!” is a great mnemonic device with a lot of assonance—repetition of the same vowels, but what it says isn't so.

The rain in Spain doesn't stay mainly in the plain. It hardly falls there at all. It falls primarily in the mountainous north and northwest of Spain not on the Meseta, the central plateau, which is an elevated plain. In fact, the Meseta and other areas of Spain that might be designated plains have semi-arid climates.

Today and next Sunday we have as our gospel texts portions of what is known in Luke's gospel as the Sermon on the Plain. And it is not mainly in the plain, it is exclusively in and on the plain.

There are plains in Palestine, most especially the plain of Sharon, an important agricultural region. Luke doesn't say where this plain is located or which one it is, however...

...Just as Luke doesn't say which mountain Jesus and the apostles and other disciples have just come down from.

...Just as two weeks from now when Jesus goes up another mountain with Peter, James, and John and is transfigured, Luke won't disclose the name of that mountain either.

In the last couple hundred years in particular, students of the Bible, both scholars and lay people, have endeavored to identify the exact locations of the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Mount of the Ascension, and so on. While these are interesting studies in their way, they rather miss the point.

Our task is not so much to identify the geographical locations where Jesus said and did and experienced these various things as to understand what his words and deeds and experiences mean for us, what they commend to us, what they require of us.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as the gospel of Mark use geography in different ways. If a place name is given, such as the village of Capernaum in last week's gospel, then we have some specificity to work with. There may be value in finding out a little more about Capernaum.

If there is no place name given, such as the plain, the level place, in today's gospel, then the notion of the kind of geographical feature may be the thing to pay attention to as part of the context for Jesus' words and deeds and experiences.

"Jesus came down with the twelve apostles," our gospel today says, "and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon."

He comes down with the twelve apostles. He comes down from a mountain where he chose from among his many, many disciples—his students and followers—twelve to bear the title and responsibilities not only of disciples but also of apostles.

Apostles are persons entrusted with particular missions and tasks. Literally, apostles are persons who are sent.

Luke's gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus the Christ commissioning or sending the apostles out to all nations to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name. It's the last thing he does in Luke before ascending into heaven. But here in Luke chapter 6, still fairly early in Jesus' public ministry, twelve apostles are created, appointed, and established as apostles on a mountain.

And then they come down from a mountain with Jesus and stand with him on a level place, a plain, a plateau, and they are not alone. They are surrounded by a whole bunch of other disciples from whom these twelve apostles were chosen, and by a great crowd of other people, people from the city of Jerusalem and the region of Judea and also people from outside the country, from Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon—a religiously and ethnically and economically diverse group of listeners.

All of these folks are on the plain, the level place together. On one hand, yes, on the same *level*. On the other hand, yes, in *plain* sight of Jesus and one another: clearly visible to one another with no obstructions.

In various places in scripture, plains or level places are associated with “corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (see Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11).”<sup>1</sup>

In other places, though, as in Isaiah 40:4, level places and plains are signs of God's inbreaking realm in the messianic age: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

The plain is not the mountain. It is not removed from the fray; it is in the midst of it. The plain is filled with the brokenness, afflictions, contradictions, disruptions and need of the present age. And in this Sermon on the Plain Jesus teaches his apostles and disciples and those curious other folks in the crowd who might become disciples how to live the way that leads to and co-creates the realm of God—not just in the relative rare air of a mountain but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the hot, dirty, complex, confusing, and sometimes sorrowful environment of a plain.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald J. Allen in “Working Preacher,” February 17, 2019 (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-617-26>), accessed February 12, 2022

The audience, the congregation who together hear the Sermon on the Plain—the apostles, the other disciples, the people in the crowd—all stand together with Jesus on a level place. And they have different designations and roles.

How do you hear the words of this Sermon on the Plain? In what role are you? Apostle? Disciple? Person in the crowd?

Are you clear on the mission God has given you in this season, claiming your apostolic role and responsibilities?

Are you a committed disciple, a follower and student submitting to the discipline of Jesus' teachings and example?

Are you a person in the crowd, interested, curious, but not quite sure about this Jesus movement and all it entails?

Perhaps you are all three—apostle, disciple, member of the crowd—or oscillating among the three options depending on what part of the Sermon on the Plain you're hearing.

The Sermon on the Plain in Luke is similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. But it's shorter, terser, much more to the point.

Like the Sermon on the Mount, it has some beatitudes, some blessings for particular people in particular circumstances, but only four of them. And each beatitude has a corresponding woe or cursed circumstance. Point and counterpoint.

Beatitudes and woes were a familiar mode of teaching and prophecy, as we heard in the first reading from Jeremiah, and were used by Jesus like the prophets before him.

Blessed are...how happy are, how fortunate are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the persecuted.

Cursed are...how unhappy are, how unfortunate are the rich, the full, the laughing, the well thought of.

We could spend a long time on what these blessings and curses mean in our context today. Suffice to say that Jesus was calling those folks then and calling us now to use our resources in the service of all, not just ourselves. Those of us who

have it relatively easy in one area should assist those who are struggling in the same, turning destitution into adequate income, hunger to satiety, mourning to joy, disparagement to affirmation. We should turn the upside-down world right side up with us as laborers together with God.

“Jesus came down with the twelve apostles,” our gospel today says, “and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.”

A level place. A plain. Perhaps a plateau, like the actual plain or plateau in Spain, the Meseta, a high, semi-arid climate that puts a lot of things in perspective and presents a lot of challenges for the person who would walk across it on Camino.

When we sense that we are on a plateau, that we have reached a certain point and plateaued in some way, no longer making the progress that we were before in something important to us, we have reached what James Clear calls the “plateau of latent potential.”

In such times we are tempted to drop the habit or practice, no matter how wise or healthy it is. We reach a place where it just doesn't seem worth it as it did before. We aren't seeing results like we did earlier.

We have arrived at “the plateau of latent potential.” Most endeavors worth the effort include this point or period of time. And most endeavors worth the effort pay their biggest dividends, yield their greatest gains after we have stuck with them for a long time.

Both James Clear and Jesus would remind us that such plateaus are to be expected. They are part of the journey. For even here in what many consider paradise, we live mainly on the plain, in the midst of the fray. We live on the plain and sometimes plateau that is filled with the brokenness, afflictions, contradictions, disruptions, and need of the present age. An environment that is often hot, dirty, complex, confusing, and sometimes sorrowful.

There are amazing resources and amazing generosity to match here at St Paul's. Our collective capacity to participate in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation is great. Here at the end of the road, as an heir of the apostles sent forth in the name of Christ, what do you feel God asking you to be, to do, to receive, to pledge, to give? Will you say yes?