

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 20-B (19 Sept 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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## **Collect**

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

*Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37*

## **1 Status: King of the Mountain**

When my family and I go to visit Becky's parents in Texas, that means living on the ranch for a few days, surrounded by cows and goats and the dogs that watch over them. Goats are funny creatures. Sometimes we'll be there shortly after a cold or rainy spell, when a bunch of babies will have been born at once. These little kids stay together near the barn, and Becky's dad will sometimes pile up lumber or other debris for them to climb on. Those goats love to climb, and compete to hold the highest point on the structure. You may remember as a child playing "King of the Hill" on a playground slide or other structure. The baby goats do the same thing and its very cute.

That's the same thing that's going on in our Gospel reading today, only when it's grown men doing it, it's less cute. The disciples are jostling for status, position, and power. There's an ugly humor when Jesus asks them what they were talking about and no one will answer. Jesus knows what they were talking about. And they know that Jesus knows. They also know, they can sense on some subconscious level, that Jesus does not approve. This jostling for position – it's not discipleship. It's more like middle school! Following Jesus calls for something different.

If this story sounds familiar to you, there's a reason for it: last week's Gospel was nearly the same. Jesus is saying the same things over and over. This is a classic pedagogical technique called "spaced repetition." Jesus is drilling this idea into the disciples' hard heads so that after he has been crucified, they will remember. Being the Messiah, the Christ, means betrayal, crucifixion, and death. Being the Messiah means the ultimate loss of status: from God incarnate to an executed criminal. Following where the Messiah goes is not going to be all sunshine and rainbows.

## 2 James: Gentle Words, Willing to Yield

Our epistle reading today is from James, widely held to have been the brother of our Lord, one of Joseph's sons. Last weeks' reading from James warned against discriminating between people according to their wealth or social standing. That's just more "King of the Hill" play, more rejection of Christ. It is a kind of wisdom that James describes as "earthly, unspiritual, devilish."<sup>1</sup> James urges those who would follow Christ to act instead with a "gentleness born of wisdom."<sup>2</sup> He says "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."<sup>3</sup>

I am especially caught by that phrase in the middle: *willing to yield*. When is the last time you saw someone who was willing to yield? I feel like the current political fashion is to never yield, never admit error, no matter what. Even when people know they're wrong. As if the capacity to absorb new information, to draw fresh conclusions, and even to change one's mind was a sign of weakness rather than strength.

What would it mean for our relationships, our families, our homes, our schools, our vestries and committees, not to mention our politics, if occasionally we were willing to yield? How much space for conversation would be created, room for grace to move, opportunity for everyone to feel heard and respected? How much hatred and warfare, lawsuits and conflicts, are created around the world by a doctrinaire refusal to yield? Willingness to yield, says James, is characteristic of the wisdom that is from God.

In fact, if I had to summarize Jesus' action on the cross in just three words, "willingness to yield" wouldn't be a bad one, would it? That's just what Jesus modeled. He had every opportunity, every power and capacity to avoid the pain and abandonment of the cross. But, for your sake and mine, Jesus was "willing to yield." Even to betrayal, torture and death.

## 3 Status: Saved?

There's a question that goes around in the protestant evangelical world, "Are you saved?" When you die and you find out what's next, is that going to be a good thing for you? There's a certain terror that shows up when you ask many earnest Christians that question. Just like with the apostles, it's a question of status. As if the question of salvation is one more game of King of the Mountain, one more test or competition or opportunity to measure up or fail. If that was true, if the question of our salvation was up to us, a matter of our own strength or determination or ability, then we really would have something to worry about.

But salvation, life in God's kingdom, isn't like a defined-contribution pension plan that you can count on if only you invest enough on the front end. It's more like a defined-benefit plan that is already being provided to you: if only you will endorse the checks! There is already a King of the Mountain, and that King came down to the very bottom to make sure not to miss a single one of us with which to share the King's reward. But here's the tricky part, the part Jesus kept trying to teach his disciples: that reward isn't going to look the way you think it's going to look. Heaven is not going to be limited by the reaches of your limited imagination. When God is the King of the Mountain, the whole game is played in a very different way.

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<sup>1</sup>James 3.15c NRSV.

<sup>2</sup>James 3.14c NRSV.

<sup>3</sup>James 3.17 NRSV.

So the question is not, “are you saved” but “are you willing to yield?” Are your heart, your will, your habits of speech and action, ready for the challenge of yielding to the unexpected and shockingly good news of what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the savior of the world? The King of the Mountain?

Now is the time for us to be practicing, preparing to endorse that check and say “yes” to God’s good gift. And when we, the Church, look very odd and different to the world around us, full of grace and respect for the dignity of every single human being, that will be a sign that we are playing a different game, with different rules, under a different King. Until then, church is a school, a place for us to learn and practice, tripping over our own egos and then getting up to try again. Because where God is King of the Mountain even the smallest child can win.