

## Epiphany V Year A 2026

Our Gospel reading for today is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount... not really a sermon per se. It is a teaching.... And we will continue in this part of Matthew's narrative for the next three weeks.... This monologue of Jesus, as I said last week, is a teaching about identity... who God is... who Jesus is... and most, who the community of followers of Jesus are... What are the characteristics that make them the church, the ecclesia? That Greek word literally means the "assembly of the called."

Remember, Matthew's Gospel was written some forty plus years after the life and ministry of Jesus... a lifespan in those days. A lot had happened in the world of the Roman Empire since the birth of Jesus. It was the Golden age of the Roman Empire, begun under Augustus Caesar, but already there were signs of trouble. The Pax Romana was at best tentative... Augustus was succeeded by Tiberius who lacked the charisma of his predecessor... at his death Nero ascended to the throne. By all accounts he was a sociopath and a tyrant... and then Nero was followed by Caligula, whose overt lust for power unleashed perhaps the most violent years of the so-called Pax Romana.... Rome was experiencing dissent among the provinces of the occupied realm... and Palestine was no exception. Corruption in the military was rampant; taxes were an unbearable burden; conscription of land was at an all-time high.... The people of Judea had had enough and revolted in the year 52.... In the year 70 Vespasian, the newly crowned emperor, at Caligula's death by suicide, ordered his general, Titus, to send a message to the rebel Jews of Palestine.... The city of Jerusalem along with its Temple, the epicenter of the Jewish faith

and cultural and civic life, was burned to the ground.... The Judeans, now refugees once again, scattered into the less turbulent precincts of the empire.... One such community gathered in Antioch, in present day Syria... about a hundred or so, and called themselves the community of Matthew.... These were devout Jews who were followers of Jesus.... Devout Jews who held on to the promise that God would come to the aid of God's chosen people.... Just as God always had.... At their deliverance from slavery in Egypt; from the wilds of the Sinai desert; from the warring tribes of the Levant upon their entrance into the so-called Promised Land; from their exile in Babylon; from the iron fist of the Assyrians... and now, their oppressor was Rome, whose Emperor Jesus would refer to as Satan.... And these faithful followers of this new way of Judaism believed that God would deliver them once again; that they would find a way to live in well-being and dignity up and against an oppressive system.

So the rhythm, if you will, the rhythm of Israel's history is oppression and freedom... oppression and freedom... calamity and rebirth... calamity and rebirth.... And for Matthew, what brings about this transformation is the power of a people, a people bearing the life of God... not military power... power as the world sees it... but the power of the practice of the faith... that is, the power engendered by doing justice, loving acts of kindness... and an abiding empathy. The prophet Micah from whom we heard last week, sums up the life of faith in such simple terms. It is not our religious piety that saves; it is not our mastery of theological dogmatics... but doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly.... Our

practice is our salvation, and the salvation of those to whom we are given... Matthew's premise, and the premise of the sages and prophets of the tradition is that when people practice love, then love will replicate and grow... that a small act of love has exponential ramifications in our world; that fight or flight, is death... and that love is life.

The writer of this gospel is making the same point that Micah makes to his audience, and that Isaiah makes to his... that we have a tendency to make an idol of our religion... that as our community spiritual life becomes institutionalized we tend to serve ourselves, our own self-interest... perhaps that is just human nature... but Matthew and the prophets are here to remind us that it is in our doing the faith that God is worshipped and glorified... that we are called to be about the transformation... the restoration of our world.... That is God's sole purpose: transformation; restoration... Isaiah puts it like this: some more of my paraphrasing: ...Here is the fast I (God) require (as opposed to your institutional protestations and dogma).... Here is the fast I require: To break down injustice... to relieve the burden of oppression... to feed the hungry... to take care of the homeless, the poor, and the naked... and while you're at it treat your own kin with respect... there's a tough one!... take care of the orphan and widow.... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing will spring up quickly... and when you cry for help, God will say, here I am... your living lives of sacrifice will be a light in the dark as if it were noon... you will be strong and flourish like a watered garden... and your ruin... those broken pieces of your lives along the way...disappointments, tragedies... griefs... regrets... mistakes... the pieces of our lives,

our very ruin, will be rebuilt, redeemed, ...the broken foundation of what our forebears left us is forever restored... and it is you, God's people... it is you who will do this on my behalf, in my name.... You will be known as the restorers of the breach, the tear in the veil, the disruption between heaven and earth... you will bring about the world God intends from out of its very ruin... and know that nothing is lost.

Brothers and sisters of the Jesus Movement (that's you and me): we have been called throughout our tradition by Hebrew sages and by the New Testament writers, and by those who have articulated human conscience over the ages... we have been called to be activists; repairers of the breach; restorers of streets to live in... I love that! Ever since the church cozied up to the powers that be, arguably as early as Constantine in the fourth century... we have acquiesced to being seen and not heard.... In the modern and post-modern eras we have retreated into our personal piety and called that faith.... But we are part of a movement... a movement principally characterized by justice... and movements are about rising up, so that others may be lifted up.... So wherever there is one who suffers from shame or indignity... we raise them up... wherever there is one with not enough, we raise them up... wherever there is one oppressed, we raise them up.

Matthew uses a metaphor for the likes of us... we are salt and light... rudiments of the created order without which there is no life... rudiments of the created order without which there is no world... without the salt and light of an activist faith, the world founders in darkness, lifeless, without the savor of its beauty.... For too long now, the church has

made the choice to be an institution, instead of being a movement.... We see that in the church today in our current catastrophe; the silence of many bishops and clergy in the face of tyranny; and silence is complicity. My hope for the church, the ones called to gather in the Name of God, is that we will give ourselves to the transformation of our world.... Our witness to the truth brothers and sisters is life for the world. Don't doubt that. Wherever there are matters of injustice, that's our issue, wherever there are matters of exclusion, that's our issue, wherever there is illness and lack of care, that's our issue... wherever there are those who are held down by the system, we are to raise them up.... Wherever there are people detained, imprisoned, and brutalized by tyranny; we become their advocates... why? Because we are salt, and we are light, vital for the life of the world.... Our calling, good people, is to simply live as if that were true.