

*Based on Matthew 6:19-21. Where our treasure is.*

The question before us is this: To what - or to *whom* - do we cling when the stability to which we have become accustomed begins to crumble?

This is the underlying question propelling the presentation of The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel.

In order to understand the context of this question, we need to sort through at least three perspectives on the message.

The first perspective is that of the students of Jesus themselves, literally joining the movement in first century Galilee, as they seek to learn from him how to make a way in a world that appears to be lacking for a way.

A second perspective is ours, two millennia later, gathering in the Upper Shenandoah Valley of the United States of America, as Project 2025 unfolds before our eyes, with very little, it seems, we can do to stop it.

A third perspective is the original audience of Matthew's Gospel, some fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus: Jesus-following Jews in Antioch of Syria first received this message, uniquely crafted to address their concerns.

Jesus-following Jews in Antioch of Syria have thrived in a multi-cultural socio-political environment that gave them equal status from the beginning. They have used that status well, for generations. They have become accustomed to economic stability and cultural flourishing. They may have heard of injustice and oppression for their comrades in other parts of the Roman world, but they have not - yet - experienced it, themselves.

Until now.

By the time the message of Matthew's Gospel arrives, the stability to which the Jesus-following Jews of Antioch have become accustomed is beginning to crumble. "Project 85," we might call it, is unfolding as a direct threat to their way of life.

For a while, the distance between Antioch and Jerusalem protects the Jews of Antioch from the worst, but they are well aware of what is happening and how it will one day affect them. Uprisings in Jerusalem have been quashed, culminating in the destruction of

the Temple. The very existence of Judea as a Roman province is debated, as powers-that-be threaten to change its name altogether, thereby literally erasing it from the map. Even their supposed “friends” in Antioch have lobbied the emperor to deport the Jews from the homes their families have occupied for centuries. The Jews of Antioch may have received a reprieve from “Project 85” for the moment, but the threat still hangs over them like a sword of Damocles. To what - or to *whom* - do they cling now that the stability to which they have become accustomed has begun to crumble? This is the question before them. In response, the author of Matthew’s Gospel presents Jesus himself as a person to cling to, along with a set of his teachings for how to navigate a time such as this. Fasting and prayer we covered the last two Sundays. Today we settle on simplicity.

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel tells the Jewish community of Antioch, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

To be clear, this is not a pie in the sky by and by sentiment of suffering through the trauma of our time in the hope of a city of gold to inhabit in our death. This is a call to radical reorientation of what it REALLY means to thrive in stability ON EARTH *as it is* in heaven. We have just learned The Prayer of Jesus, after all, which literally teaches us to pray for God’s kin-dom to come in that way. Today’s Lesson extends the prayer beyond our hands and our hearts and teaches us to pray with our actions and our possessions.

If, in the midst of crumbling stability, Jesus is telling us, you capitulate to forces of fear and anger and hatred in order to cling to some semblance of what you used to have, you will fail. If, instead, you re-align yourselves with the unfolding realm of God in your midst, Jesus is telling us, you will gain it all, even if you lose it.

For me, this wisdom becomes ever more clear as I robe myself in the simple garb of sackcloth for the Season of Lent: as a sign of mourning, as a commitment to re-alignment, as a protest of injustice.

The theme of sackcloth and ashes first emerged last month in our SPC Support Group for those who have been personally affected by recent executive orders related to federal workers, DEI initiatives, immigration, transgender identity, and more. In discussing what kinds of public actions SPC might take, as Ash Wednesday approached, one of the members of our support group evoked the image of sackcloth and ashes to describe how they were feeling. The theme took off from there.

As I continue to robe myself in sackcloth through the Season of Lent, I find my inner focus transformed by this outer focus. As the roughness of the cloth rubs against my skin, my mind moves to those places in my life and in the life of the world that are as rough as sackcloth. As I consider what I would rather be wearing, my mind moves to those who long for a better life than the one they have now. As I swirl through the emotions of embarrassment and pride and fear that accompany the public nature of robing in sackcloth, my mind moves to all who suffer embarrassment and pride and fear.

How, as a student of Jesus, can I possibly cling to my own stability and cultural thriving in a world that threatens theirs? I cannot. We cannot.

We are, here in Shepherdstown, protected by the worst of Project 2025, but well aware of what is happening and how it will one day affect us all, even if it affects only some of us for the moment. The sword of Damocles hangs over us, as we pray for the center to hold and fear it has already collapsed.

One day, maybe sooner than we think, we will be called to follow Jesus even further than we have to-date. Directly to the heart of corrupt power, in loving non-violent direct action, to proclaim a way of life that places good news for the poor and release to the captive at the center of our security, and face the consequences with grace and dignity if and when corrupt power fights back.

What the Season of Lent is teaching us, what the Sermon on the Mount is teaching us, what the Way and Spirit of Jesus is teaching us, is that we cannot do that with integrity unless we are Grounded in the Spirit of life and hope and love and grace that we still believe with all our hearts will ultimately win the day. And we cannot be grounded in the Spirit if we are still clinging to some semblance of what we used to have, with fear and anger and hatred and capitulation.

Instead we must cling to our sackcloth. Instead we must cling to our fasting and our prayer, to simplicity and to giving. Instead we must cling to humility and conviction and loving, peaceful, prophetic action. Instead we must cling to the promise of resurrection propelling us ever onward:

Good will prevail in the end!