

FINDING SAFE REFUGE

Sermon, September 5, 2021

Texts: Numbers 35:6-15; Mark 7:31-36

In light of current events, you might think from the sermon title that I'll be addressing issues related to the untold thousands seeking safe refuge after the sudden withdrawal of our forces and the ensuing chaos in Afghanistan, or the ongoing crisis of multitudes streaming across our southern border fleeing turmoil and difficulty in their home nations around the globe, but I won't be doing so ... other than to encourage us to pray, and pray fervently, for safety and protection of the vulnerable innocents, and especially so as the twentieth anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks comes next Saturday. As I understand it, security forces worldwide are on very high alert.

At long last, after forty years wandering through the wilderness, the Hebrews were about to enter the Promised Land. Moses, who would not be going with them, gathered them all together to give some final instructions from God. Among those instructions were these words: *"When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee."* If someone were to accidentally kill another, that person could flee to one of these Cities of Refuge where they could find sanctuary from those who sought to avenge the dead person's blood. It was a way to find asylum; a way to find a safe place to start life over again. It was a necessary invention in a culture that could be very harsh on those who made mistakes.

We also live in a culture that can be pretty hard on people who make mistakes ... you and I have both made enough mistakes in our lifetimes to know that. We may not be guilty of manslaughter, but we certainly have caused the death of a few dreams and/or relationships by now, however unintentionally. After all, in a way all sin kills ... it does not enhance life; it detracts from life, it takes away. After nearly 37 years of pastoral ministry, I've learned by now that just about every one of us has some part of our personal biography that's pretty hard to tell; in fact, there may be parts of your story you have never told anyone. Quite often, the hard part is the part where something died. Maybe it was the death of innocence, caused at least in part by some foolish action of yours and/or by some cruel, thoughtless or brutal action of another. Maybe it was a hope that died, a dream about how your life was going to turn out. Maybe it was a trusted friendship that ended too abruptly, inadvertently killed by a stupid comment, a thoughtless deed, a misunderstanding, or, as increasingly fostered by our culture today, polarizing political disagreements. Maybe what died was your expectations about your career, or maybe it was a marriage. You didn't mean to cause this death, the death of this innocence, the death of this dream, this hope, this relationship ... but clearly it is dead, or at least mortally wounded. And you know you are at least partially responsible.

When these great mistakes or these overwhelming losses happen, we just want to get AWAY from the place of pain and hurt, to make sure that kind of hurt never happens to us again. So we run from the hurt. Too often, however, in our urge to run we don't run to the right places, we don't run to a refuge where we can stop and rest and take time to heal. We often don't take time to stop and learn from our mistakes. We run too soon to another (often destructive) relationship, or we run to our work, or we run to entertainment or to social media, or to anything that will distract us from the hard part of our story.

We know how to run, how to keep busy. Our society has taught us so well how to do that. Even in the course of a typical day we find we are racing our way through the day. A typical day may begin with you running out the door in the morning, and because you start the day rushed you have more or less destined yourself to running through the rest of it. You run to get to work, you run to get through the appointments and the projects and the schedule and the things that need to get done, and if you can fit it in, you run away from the office long enough to even run to another planet ... Planet Fitness or Workout World ... and there you get on a treadmill and run getting nowhere (*which, when you think of it, may be a painful metaphor for your life that day*). Then you run back to your work and then maybe you got to run to pick up the children at school, then you run home and realize you really don't have time to cook tonight ... again ... and nothing in the refrigerator to cook if you DID have time to cook because you didn't take time to run to the grocery store, so you run back out to get a little carry-out or you order a pizza on line. And you run through that meal, then you run through the housework and the laundry, and you run the children up to bed, then you run downstairs to feed the dog you forgot to feed earlier, then you run through your mail and email backlog of the day and the piles of bills, then you run the fed dog outside and come back in and collapse into bed, wondering, *"What in the world did I get done today?"* (You may have guessed some of that is autobiographical, although I no longer have the kids and dog at home, just two very low maintenance cats ... but some days still somehow get to be too full anyway.)

And after six days of running morning, noon and night, you make your way here into the sanctuary and we do the radically counter-cultural thing of making you *slow down*. We try to get you to be quiet, starting with the prelude ... which, by the way, is not really designed as background "elevator music" for people who are arriving late to dash in and find a seat. Just a bit of an aside: A few weeks back, I caught myself short a few weeks back saying what I often say to you as we come to the Call to Worship ... *"We begin our worship by rising for the Call to Worship which is found in*

your bulletins." That week it was after a particularly beautiful prelude that I realized I had been communicating a false message all these years. We **don't** begin our worship with the Call to Worship; we begin worship with the prelude! One reason we begin worship with the prelude is to just to make us SIT here for a minute! SLOW DOWN! STOP! AND BE QUIET! And prepare to enter the holy presence of God. In Hebrew, the root word for Sabbath is "Shavat" which literally means "to stop." (*By the way, that's STOP, not SHOP ... but that's another sermon!*) DESIST. CEASE. GIVE IT A REST. Part of the design of formal worship is to get us to *come apart* from the world, slow down, be still, and put ourselves in the presence of God and into the hands of Jesus so He can help take us aside from the busy-ness of life, just as He took the deaf man aside in our Gospel reading ... He takes us aside, settles us down, and cleans out our ears so we can hear whatever it is we need so desperately to hear from God. We are not here to rush through worship to get a quick spiritual buzz so that we can check off worship on our obligation list and go on to the rest of our busy lives. That's not what we're trying to do; there's a reason we don't have a drive-up window! We are trying to create something of a City of Refuge here, a place where we can stop running for an hour to be still and know that God is God! When you enter the doors of this sanctuary, you are coming to the New Testament City of Refuge. A sanctuary, a safe place. Only when you are safe and quiet in the presence of Jesus will you at long last be able to hear ... to hear the hope-filled words of God speaking to you. In the distraction of hurry, we find it hard to listen.

I told you before of a UCLA study about people's listening skills which came to the conclusion that the average person only hears about half of what is said. And the average person only *understands* half of that! So now we're down to the average listener only understanding a quarter of what is actually said. The study also revealed the average listener only believes half of that, and only remembers half of that! So, that comes out to a little over six percent! Is it any wonder we have communication problems? We're only really grasping and comprehending and believing and remembering 6.2 percent of what's actually being said, and that's when we are listening to each other! How about when it comes to listening to God? Today's Gospel lesson can also be a metaphor for our spiritual deafness, we just can't hear or comprehend God speaking to us until Jesus gets a hold of us, slows us down, takes us aside to a quiet place, and opens up our ears! That's what we want to happen in this City of Refuge we call worship!

Maybe the healing touch of Jesus will come from the music of the prelude one morning, or maybe from the anthem or special music, or maybe something in the sermon, or something in the prayers, or maybe it'll come simply from another member's warm welcome and smile of greeting. Maybe it'll come in hearing, really hearing, the Assurance of Pardon, "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." You hear those words, and you remember what is sometimes easy to forget: that you don't have to keep running, especially from God. You are loved, cherished by the God who died to redeem you! You don't have to keep running through life like a fugitive because the things you've done have already been forgiven. Look around you. This place is filled with exhausted people, people just like you. Here in the sanctuary, there is no THEM; there's just us. There's just us here, and we've all come in search of the same things: a little bit of grace, a place to find blessing, a place to rest. We don't want to come to another place where we have to be on your guard against attack; we don't want to come to a place where we have to run and hide. This place is to be a sanctuary, a place of refuge. Here you share pews with women and men, children and adults, Democrats and Republicans, people who live in big homes and people who rent back rooms, people who are overworked by their employers and people who long to have an employer who would work them at all, people who are hurt and, sometimes, the people who hurt them. Even the guy who was driving so slow ahead of you on Main Avenue and didn't use his turn signal, he's here in church today! We're all here. And we don't discriminate ... we equally call all of us sinners, sinners in need of grace. That's what brings us together. Because in some way or another we were all on the run, just looking for a little bit of mercy. The only reason any of us walk through those doors into this City of Refuge is that we want to put mistakes of the past behind us, stop, and listen for the directive, healing, gracious words of Jesus Christ.

As the Psalmist said in our Call to Worship, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.*" By the grace of Jesus Christ, refuge is extended to all who come to this sanctuary. There is a place here for the lonely who are just looking for a place to sit down in the companionship of other people. There is a place here for those who are anything *but* lonely during the week who are just looking for a place to sit down and find a bit of quiet, and perhaps some help with their kids. There is a place in the City of Refuge for those who are tired and discouraged; there's a place here for those who are energetic and full of hope and life. In short, there's a place here for everyone. There is a place even for those of you who might think you do not belong here. In fact, you are our honored guests.

Whenever people who are very different come together, and stop running long enough to discover and experience and hear and be embraced by the God Who is our Refuge, the God Who is with us and within us, the most wonderful dreams and hopes begin to appear, dreams of a whole other way of living; dreams of a time when no one will ever have to run away again.

And we are strengthened to go back to life, refreshed, renewed, restored and forgiven.