

June 13, 2021
The Third Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 6), Year B
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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5:6-17
Mark 4:26-34

As you know, there is a cicada explosion happening in some parts of the country right now. These are of course the Brood X cicadas that emerge every seventeen years. I still haven't seen a Brood X cicada in person, but on May 18 they started showing up in my social media feeds. That post was courtesy of a friend who lives in Maryland. One week later, she posted this video on Facebook. ¹ [Play video.]

Impressive, right? I'd been feeling a little sad about missing the cicada action. But then I saw a cicada segment on Wednesday's CBS Evening News. It mentioned a car accident caused when a cicada flew into the open window and distracted the driver. It included two clips of local television reporters caught on camera freaking out when they had realized that a cicada had landed on them and wouldn't let go. It showed an image from the Baltimore–Washington National Weather Service radar, which showed a cicada swarm. And it reported the previous night's grounding of the plane slated to ferry President Joe Biden's press corps on his first trip abroad. Apparently the cicadas invaded the engines in such large numbers that the press corps had to take a different plane. I later saw a story about that in The New York Times. It was titled, "Cicadas Took on Biden's Press Plane. They Won."²

Maybe those cicadas are more fun with a little remove. Though I have no personal cicada photos or video to offer, I did re-share this meme on Facebook:³



It says, "Cast off the shell of your old self—spend all summer outside screaming." Okay, maybe not screaming, but at least something like singing and dancing. For me, this was less about cicadas than about our late-pandemic post-vaccination release. We haven't been underground for seventeen years, but some days it has felt like it. The cicada emergence's similarity to Moses and the plague of locusts is not the only reason the events of the last fifteen months have felt like they are of biblical proportions.

I Googled the term *of biblical proportions*, and the first definition I found was this: "Of or pertaining to a natural disaster or other cataclysmic event so immense that it brings to mind biblical accounts of horrific catastrophes."⁴ I realize that to say that something is *of biblical proportions* is to say that it is horrifically *bad*, and that seems *too* bad. But maybe it doesn't have to be that way. Maybe biblical proportions can apply to the *good* as well as to the *bad*. And maybe good or bad depends at least in part on the angle of perception.

Today's gospel passage describes the kingdom of God in botanical terms. In either case, the point is the growth from small to great, a fruitful production for which God alone is ultimately responsible. The author of Mark's gospel is looking back on prior events after the passing of several decades. He has the benefit of hindsight, so he knows how the story will go. Therefore the inference here is the rapid spread of the Good News about Jesus, and the phenomenal growth of the Christian community.

This is the overarching theme of the Book of Acts, through which our Bible study group has been wending its way. One of the things that Acts and the group have touched on is the establishment of authority in the burgeoning church, authority in terms of both organizational structure and foundational belief. But those early followers of Jesus couldn't and didn't start with that. They didn't start with authority. They started by talking about Jesus, and things just took off. We might say that the kingdom of God is like the Brood X cicada emergence. Eventually, the church formulated structure and belief. Until then, it must often have been rather like utter and complete chaos.

June is LGBTQ+ Pride month. Well, sort of. It's complicated here in New Haven, because national Pride is in June, but New Haven Pride is in September. Therefore every year I wonder whether we ought to observe Pride in June, with everyone else, or in September, with New Haven. Here in the church, I mention LGBTQ+ issues occasionally anyway, as I mention racial justice and care for creation. There are some things we just ought to be noticing. One of my sermons in February mentioned LGBTQ+ issues associated with The Episcopal Church and white Christian nationalism. That seemed like a good reason to wait until September.

But three weeks ago, an email arrived in my inbox. It was from someone I don't know, sent to the church website's "webmaster" email address, which automatically forwards on to me. The sender said he was church shopping but would take a pass on St. Thomas's because of our "celebration of homosexuality" that we "shout out loud continuously." I don't know to what the writer was referring; the email was short, but also sarcastic and rude. I would read the whole thing out loud, but part of it I just can't read to you. If you want to read it, I'll post the text in the Zoom chat after the service. I have been working on LGBTQ+ issues in both secular and church settings for going on thirty years. I should by now be used to the vitriol that work attracts from certain sectors of the Christian world. And yet it still bothers me.

I was living in Vermont back in the year 2000, when Vermont became the first state to provide full legal protection for same-sex couples, by inventing and legalizing civil unions. Because it's Vermont, as the state legislature moved through that process, there was extensive and mostly polite conversation about it, in venues formal and informal. As I remember it, the only justification offered by those opposing civil unions was the Bible. I attended one of the two public hearings hosted by the state senate judiciary committee. Among those who testified was a fundamentalist minister who literally waved his Bible around while he spoke, and a lay woman who stated that recognizing same-sex relationships would cause Vermont to descend into "homosexual chaos." I thought that was ridiculous, but she really *was* scared—not of "homosexual chaos" exactly, but of change that she could not control.

The civil union bill passed, thanks in large part to leading support from progressive religious communities including the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. Same-sex marriage came to Massachusetts in 2004, to Connecticut in 2008, and to the entire country in 2015, with the Supreme Court’s Obergefell v. Hodges decision. That arc of events was about same-sex marriage but not just about that, because with it came a massive shift in public opinion about LGBTQ+ people. Some of us believe that God is at work in all this. In this corner of the kingdom, that proverbial mustard seed has grown into a great shrub, and all sorts of birds have found their way into its branches.

The last I heard, homosexual chaos has yet to materialize, but the world *has* changed. As we celebrate that change, we also recognize that it is incomplete. The Stonewall riots laid the groundwork for work that is not yet done. Of this, the rash of anti-trans legislation in conservative states is a potent indication. The queer community itself has often been and still is behind the curve on race.

This sermon is about LGBTQ+ issues, and it’s also about much more than that. The world *does* feel particularly chaotic right now. But remember this: God seems to be most creative in the midst of chaos. I think Jesus placed himself right at the border of the chaos. Sometimes he crossed that border. Sometimes he caused the chaos himself. I wonder whether it’s possible to follow Jesus authentically without experiencing and even causing chaos.

Christianity has often been much more about policing boundaries than exploding them. One of the great gifts of what used to be called the Gay Liberation Movement is what it is doing for everyone. Everybody needs some liberation. So I’ll ask this question: Who has God made you that you have been afraid to be?

Who has God made you that you have been afraid to be? If everyone asked and answered this question, there *would* be an emergence of biblical proportions. I say, *Bring it on*. Be a cicada. Cast off the shell of *your* old self—spend all summer outside screaming and singing and dancing.

Notes

¹ Video recorded and posted by Dina Van Klaveren, May 25, 2021. At the times of this writing, it was available online at <https://www.facebook.com/dinavk/videos/10158742797543891> (accessed June 13, 2021).

² Michael D. Shear, “Cicadas Took on Biden’s Press Plane. They Won.,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2021, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/us/politics/cicadas-biden.html> (accessed June 13, 2021).

³ Original source unknown.

⁴ “Of biblical proportions,” *Definitions.net*, available online at <https://www.definitions.net/definition/of+biblical+proportions> (accessed June 13, 2021).