

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 10, 2024

Mark 12:38-48, Proper 27 (Year B)

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

I invite you to hold “Into My Arms” – the encouragement of its words and its music – as we enter the Gospel together.²

This morning’s lesson follows soon after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the previous chapter of Mark. Recalling our Palm Sunday readings, the week of Passover begins with Jesus asking for a colt as he and his followers approach the city from the east.³ Two of his disciples return with a young donkey draped in their cloaks, and they seat Jesus on the small steed.⁴ Neighbors gather along the roadside and wave branches as he and his companions pass, proclaiming, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”⁵

At the same time, on the opposite side of Jerusalem, “Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor ... enter[s the city from the west,] at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers.”⁶ These authorities draft the energies and attendance of the Jewish festival to *their* advantage. Like a Cold War military parade of tanks, artillery, and ranks of uniformed soldiers, Pilate’s cavalcade intends to intimidate and to reinforce the power of the Empire.

Pitiable peasant pageantry on the one side of Jerusalem, and a spectacle of coldly serious strength on the other ...

A proclamation of God’s reign called from the east, and a demonstration of Ceasar’s might from the west ...

For anyone forecasting the odds, the Empire’s execution of Jesus and the humiliation of his followers must have seemed inevitable. Even so, Jesus and his surrogates debate their cause with Temple leaders.⁷ They make their case to the masses, decrying the values of the Empire that privilege the powerful at the expense of the poor.⁸ They question the integrity of a religious establishment that curries favor with imperialists.⁹ They call for the people to “Love God with all their hearts” and “to love their neighbors as themselves.”¹⁰

Then, in today’s scene, Jesus turns his attention from those *outside* his fold, and directly addresses his disciples.

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Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds found me during my senior year of high school.¹¹ Over the years, I have loyally brought Cave's long-players to my home stereo [some more than once, given my weakness for re-issues and re-masters and deluxe editions]. During one tide of the pandemic, I took a months-long deep-dive into his expansive catalogue. Through all the stylistic turns and strange characters, "Into My Arms" – from 1997's, *The Boatman's Call* – has remained a favorite for both its reassurances and its challenges.¹² I mean, a pop song that begins with a demanding theological claim?¹³ You had me at hello, Mr. Cave.

Leaning into his crooner inclinations, the song presents a relationship at an intersection.¹⁴ The narrator and his lover disagree about some fundamentals of how the world works, yet, despite their differences, they love one another consumingly. The narrator presents their disagreements warmly,¹⁵ his love opening him to ideas that contradict his own, until he can feel his convictions wavering against the force of his affection.¹⁶

I bring this song into conversation with us on this day because, like Nick Cave's protagonist, we do not worship an interventionist god. Sharpening the point to our current circumstance, the God of the risen Christ did not plan for Donald Trump to be elected President of the United States – not as a reward, not as a punishment. Likewise, God did not plan for Kamala Harris to be elected President, for God did not elect any of this week's outcomes – *a majority of the American people did*. And God will not now push partisan pieces forward or rearrange them on the cosmic gameboard either to advance or to correct what we have chosen for ourselves. See, the God of the risen Christ calls *us* to that responsibility.

* * *

To consider, then, how we people of God might respond in this moment, we return to Jesus exhorting his followers – to Jesus exhorting *us*.

Realize, Jesus does not point to the scribes' fraudulence to threaten *them* with judgement; Jesus cautions those closest to him against falling where the scribes have fallen.¹⁷ ***Beware***, he says to his friends, ***that you do not imagine your righteousness grants you impunity***. Anticipating the indignation that might swell along with their anguish after his crucifixion, he offers counsel both faithful and practical.

He warns them:

If your response to Calvary compromises the integrity of your convictions ... if on that grave day you take up the tactics of those who have defeated me ... if you dare match brutal strength with that of the Empire ... then you will receive the *greater* condemnation¹⁸ – for not only will you corrupt our movement, *they will crush you!* My beloved, we lifted palms and they brandished steel; self-righteous rage will not mark your courage, it will testify to your sin, and not your sin only, but to your *foolishness*.

Look instead to the poor widow and *her* offering,¹⁹ she whose humility shows greater courage than all the authorities, than all the governors of the earth. She does not act out of the abundance of her aggrievements, not out of pride, not out of might.²⁰ The poor widow responds from her faith, from God's Love of her, and from her love of God. She gives what coins she has to give because she believes – *soul deep*, she believes! – that her faithfulness can change the world ... and she believes that yours can, too.

* * *

In the twenty-five years after the release of *The Boatman's Call*, two of Nick Cave's sons died: the first at fifteen-years-old, and the second at thirty-one.²¹ During a season so full of grief for him and his family, Cave's lyrical archive began to garner unusual attention for a punk-rock star. He has since spent time with the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,²² and Cave now speaks often about the importance of Anglican worship in the rhythm of his life. Promoting his latest album – entitled *Wild God*²³ – he reflects openly and vulnerably about his personal history.

While wrestling his own wonderings, he also launched a question-and-answer site, "The Red Hand Files."²⁴ Fans send inquiries through a simple web form, and he responds with astonishing sincerity and wisdom. Recent submissions include:

"What does it take to be free?"
"Where or how do you find joy?"
"Do you like raisins?"

In one moving post, Valerio of Stockholm asks:

Following the last few years, I'm feeling empty and more cynical than ever. I'm losing faith in other people, and I'm scared to pass these feeling to my little son. Do you still believe in Us (human beings)?

Cave responds with the poor widow's grace, with her courage:

Dear Valerio,

You are right to be worried about your growing feelings of cynicism and you need to take action to protect yourself and those around you, especially your child. Cynicism is not a neutral position – and although it asks almost nothing of us, it is highly infectious and unbelievably destructive. In my view, it is the most common and easy of evils.

I know this because much of my early life was spent holding the world and the people in it in contempt. It was a position both seductive and indulgent ...²⁵

Unlike cynicism, hopefulness is hard-earned, makes demands upon us, and can often feel like the most indefensible and lonely place on Earth. [Yet,] Hopefulness is not a neutral position either. [Hope] is adversarial. It is the warrior emotion that can lay waste to cynicism. Each redemptive or loving act, as small as you like, Valerio, such as reading to your little boy, or showing him a thing you love, or singing him a song, or putting on his shoes, [these] keep the devil down in the hole. [These acts declare] the world and its inhabitants have value and are worth defending. [These acts say] the world is worth believing in. In time, we come to find that it is so.

Love,

Nick²⁶

* * *

Trinitarians, it is good that we are together ... for we have work to do *today*: to love and serve God as faithful witnesses of the risen Christ – to walk, one gracious step at a time, out into that intersection of God’s dream and the world’s fury, humility and faith – *hope!* – our only strength and shield.

For while I do not believe God has a plan, like Nick Cave’s companions, “I [do] believe in love ... and I [believe] that you do, too.”

I believe in a path we can walk together, you and I and all of us, the whole human family.

I believe God’s hopes light that holy way, a high road where we honor our differences with understanding and not shame; where we serve one another with care and not compulsion; where we lay waste to cynicism and believe in the essential goodness of people;²⁷ where we believe ... *soul deep*, we believe! ... that *our* faithfulness can change the world – that *Trinity Church’s* faithfulness can change the world for Good! – and “by every redemptive or loving act, as small as you like,” we will come to find it so.

Held in common by this promise,
Amen.

“**Into My Arms**” (Nicholas Edward Cave, 1957-)

I don’t believe in an interventionist God,
but I know, darling, that you do.
But if I did, I would kneel down and ask him
not to intervene when it came to you –

not to touch a hair on your head,
leave you as you are, and
if he felt he had to direct you
then to direct you into my arms.

Into my arms, oh, Lord
Into my arms, oh, Lord
Into my arms, oh, Lord
Into my arms

And I don't believe in the existence of angels,
but looking at you I wonder if that's true.
But if I did, I would summon them together
and ask them to watch over you –
to each burn a candle for you,
to make bright and clear your path, and
to walk, like Christ, in grace and love
and guide you into my arms.

Into my arms, oh, Lord ...

But I believe in love,
and I know that you do, too.
And I believe in some kind of path
that we can walk down, me and you.
So, keep your candles burning,
make her journey bright and pure,
that she'll keep returning
always and evermore,
into my arms ...

¹ From Psalm 31.

² In worship today, one of our high-school-senior choristers sang this Nick Cave song to introduce this sermon.

³ Mark 11:1-6.

⁴ Mark 11:7-8.

⁵ Mark 11:9.

⁶ This scene so powerfully described in Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's *The Last Week* (Harper Collins, 2006, pp.2-3).

⁷ Mark 11:27-33.

⁸ Mark 12:1-17.

⁹ Mark 11:15-19.

¹⁰ Mark 12:28-34.

¹¹ I bought the soundtrack of the forgettable film, *Gas, Food, Lodging*, because its first side featured a series of instrumental tracks from J. Mascis, the principal of Dinosaur Jr [noting that I describe Mascis as the “principal” with all respect due Dinosaur Jr’s bassist, Lou Barlow, whose own band – Sebadoh – I admire enormously]. However, I soon came to prefer the second side which included “Lament,” an unusual song by Cave and the Seeds. Blending the beatnik vibes of Tom Waits and the camp of Talking Heads, the desperation of Warren Zevon and an undercurrent of punk-rock rage, I became a fan of Cave. [That side also featured “Love,” an all-time favorite song from Shreveport native, Victoria Williams. Best known for her bringing awareness to the healthcare needs of musicians, artists from Lou Reed to Pearl Jam covered her songs on the 1993 benefit album, *Sweet Relief*].

¹² In recent years, I have enjoyed [the version of “Into My Arms” that Cave plays on his COVID-era release, *Idiot Prayer*](#), a solo concert he performed into the ether of our isolation and later released as a recording in 2020.

¹³ “I don’t believe in an interventionist god.”

¹⁴ “Into My Arms.” Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds. *The Boatman’s Call*, Mute/Reprise Records, 1997. You can find the full lyrics printed below the sermon.

¹⁵ “I know, darling, that you do.”

¹⁶ “But looking at you, I wonder if that’s true.”

¹⁷ Mark 12:38-40a.

¹⁸ Mark 12:40b.

¹⁹ Mark 12:41-42.

²⁰ Mark 12:43-44.

²¹ Marchese, David. “[Nick Cave Lost Two Sons. His Fans Then Saved His Life.](#)” *New York Times*, September 11, 2022.

²² Williams, Rowan. “[Nick Cave: My Son’s Death Brought Me Back To Church.](#)” *The Times*, March 4, 2023.

²³ Released August 30, 2024 on PIAS.

²⁴ The site is all kinds of wonderful: theredhandfiles.com.

²⁵ The omitted section of Cave's remarkable response: "The truth is, I was young and had no idea what was coming down the line. I lacked the knowledge, the foresight, the self-awareness. I just didn't know. It took a devastation to teach me the preciousness of life and the essential goodness of people. It took a devastation to reveal the precariousness of the world, of its very soul, to understand that it was crying out for help. It took a devastation to understand the idea of mortal value, and it took a devastation to find hope."

²⁶ The exchange with Valerio: "[Do you still believe in Us \(human beings\)?](#)"

²⁷ Lord, have mercy: despite our imperfections.