



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 8 (A)

Shake Off the Dust

[RCL] **Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**

Anis Mojgani (A-nees Mohj-ga-nee) was born to an African American mother and Iranian father and is the current Oregon Poet Laureate. A two-time National Slam Poetry champion, he performed his poem “Shake the Dust” on January 9, 2010, at the Heavy and Light event at the House of Blues in Orlando. You can look up his performance on YouTube to hear it in his own voice.

The poem is addressed to what Jesus would consider “the least of these”—people on the margins, people who are brokenhearted, people who need hope. As Mojgani says in this excerpt,

“...This is for the benches and the people sitting upon them.
This is for the bus drivers driving a million broken hymns
And for the men who have to hold down 3 jobs,

“Simply to hold up their children.
For the nighttime schoolers
And for the midnight bike riders trying to fly
Shake the dust.

“For the two year-olds who cannot be understood
because they speak half English and half God
Shake the dust.

“For the girl whose brother is going crazy

“For the gym class wall flower
And for the 12 year-olds that are afraid of taking public showers
For the kid who's always late to class because he forgets the combination to his locker
For the girl who loves somebody else
Shake the dust...

“...This is, This is for you.

“Make sure that by the time the fisherman returns
You are gone
Because just like the days, I burn at both ends
And every time I write, every time I open my eyes
I am cutting out a part of myself
Just to give it to you.
So shake the dust and take me with you do

“For none of this, has ever been for me
All that pushes and pulls
And pushes and pulls
Pushes for you

“So grab the world by its clothes pins
And shake it out again, and again
And jump on top and take it for a spin
And when you hop off, shake it again...

“...Shaking the dust
So when the world knocks at your front door
Clutch the knob tightly, and open on up
Run forward into its wide spread greeting arms
With your hands before you
Your fingertips trembling
Though they may be.”

Shake the dust. You may have heard this before – in fact, quite recently, in our lectionary on June 18, at the beginning of the section (we’re at the end now) where Jesus is giving instructions about how the missionary Christians need to behave and what they should bring with them as they go forth into the world. Specifically, Matthew 10:14 says, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”

Shake the dust. Historically, what this phrase meant was for the traveling Palestinian Jew to shake off the dust of pagan countries before re-entering the holy land. When Jesus tells the disciples, who are going out to spread his Good News to “shake off the dust” when they are not welcome or will not be listened to, the meaning is clear. Whoever welcomes the missionary—whether prophet (a spokesperson for the Risen Lord), righteous person (not a prophet, but someone who has other gifts), or “little ones” (an ordinary

follower of Jesus who is traveling with the others)—welcomes Jesus. And when Jesus is welcomed into a household, it means that the household becomes part of the larger story, a subversive, sacred story of God and the world.

As Christians, we are living from within a particular story and that story shapes the way we live. All participate in the apostolic mission. During the time when the Gospel of Matthew was written, the Matthean community thought Jesus was returning in their lifetime and that belief shaped the immediacy of their actions within the story. They shifted from just the Twelve who were sent from Galilee to expand to both those who were sent—the missionaries—and those who receive—the settled Christians in other towns and lands of Matthew’s church. They work together to spread the Gospel as commissioned at Pentecost – to the ends of the earth.

Jesus did not return in their lifetime, but the commission still stands. God’s promises to Abraham continue and are placed in the hands of those who are faithful, who in turn become the witnesses of faith in every age, even our age, this age, right now. These promises do not mean that Christians are protected from difficulties; difficulties come in every life and are opportunities for us to respond with faithfulness, living into true freedom in Christ.

Shake the dust. Shake the dust of oppression, of sexism, of fear, of insecurity, and all the other *isms* and broken places—shake that dust off and leave it to lie behind you as you step over the threshold into the sacred land of promise. As Amy Adams’ character in the film *Junebug* said, “God loves you as you are, but that doesn’t mean God wants you to stay that way.” We are both the missionary and the settled church. God’s story holds us and carries us forward. It forms us in baptism and continues to shape us as we respond faithfully to those vows. This grace is transformative and draws us into living with true freedom and not human-created liberation.

In modern life, we are faced with all sorts of ways to access liberation. We hear in global politics how this often means that a country’s previous government is taken over by a different type of political enslavement. The same goes for financial freedom when it comes to lines of credit—all is well until you have to pay it back. Or what about in businesses? The freedom to expand your business might cost another person the livelihood of their business. In relationships—romantic, friendships, communal—we often desire particular freedoms that come with a price to someone else. Human-made freedom comes with many strings attached. A former Christian Ethics professor at Sewanee used to say that, as Christians, we are not truly free until the most marginalized of us is free.

The perceived freedoms we have often draw us deeper into sin and spiritual death. However, true freedom in Christ brings us into life. N.T. Wright puts it this way: “True freedom is not simply the random, directionless life, but the genuine humanness that reflects the image of God.” With this freedom comes responsibility and desire to be in relationship with God, neighbor, and self. True freedom is subversive. We are called into becoming who God created us to be and in doing so, invite others to join us in this counter-cultural narrative. We are drawn into the Paschal mystery within our own life story—the dying and rising

of Christ in daily life. This changes us, and as it changes us, it changes the world. We can leave that dust that we have shaken off and open the door to a new and different life,

“With your hands before you
Your fingertips trembling
Though they may be.”

Amen.

***The Rev. Danae Ashley** is an Episcopal priest and marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and Washington State, and is a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC. Danae uses the arts in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual. She also joined the Episcopal Church’s CREDO Faculty in 2022, living into another aspect of her call of supporting clergy across the church. Danae has written for Working Preacher, Luther Seminary’s Faith+Lead, Episcopal Café, and Sermons that Work, as well as being a contributor to podcasts, books, and a play about fertility struggle. Her favorite pastimes include reading, traveling with her husband, making sure their rescue dog, Cooper, is living his best life, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.*