

“By What Authority?”**Rev. Maeve Kieran Hammond****Exodus 17:1-7 | Gospel of Matthew 21:23-27****27 September 2026**

“By what authority?” “By what authority?” This is the question the chief priests and elders ask of Jesus as he teaches in the temple.

In turn, Jesus poses them a question: “If you tell me the answer, I’ll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. Where did John [the Baptist] get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?”

The religious authorities, proving themselves to be more strategic than spiritual, return Jesus’s question with a non-answer. They don’t want to upset the apple cart or do too much explaining. “We don’t know,” they reply.

Remember, this encounter with Jesus and the religious authorities occurs in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. There are twenty-eight chapters in Matthew, meaning that we are about seventy-five percent of the way through this particular rendition of Jesus’s ministry, told from the perspective of Matthew. By this point, Jesus has already preached his Sermon on the Mount, healed the sick, commissioned the twelve disciples, experienced his transfiguration, and rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He has had several run-ins with religious authorities. They know who he is. They know why he’s teaching in the temple.

We read of a similar situation in the Book of Exodus, one of our other lectionary readings for today. The Israelites have crossed the Red Sea. The narrative finds them wandering in the desert. They’re thirsty—and angry.

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?” They demand of Moses. “Is God really with us or not?,” Scripture tells us this is what their accusations suggest.

“Why are you testing God?” Moses repudiates.

Lo and behold, God tells Moses to strike his shepherd’s rod and hit the rock at Horeb. Water pours out, and the Israelites are able to drink.

Despite the many miracles, despite making it this far in God’s people’s journey to the promised land, they still doubt. They still question. They still need proof.

Who is their authority, then? It doesn’t seem to be God. Yet, generations of biblical figures, both leaders and common people, in our Scriptures have moments wherein they question or flat-out reject God and God’s will. What is this about? Why, despite these figures’ commitment to God, do they struggle to believe and struggle to accept God’s presence and grace? Whom, or what, are they worshipping?

I recently met with a clergy peer, another Christian minister. Sitting down over sandwiches at Black Horse Tavern, we caught each other up on our lives. Naturally, the conversation moved to faith. This friend mentioned a stumbling block they often encounter in their own life and in their work of tending to a church community: change. When the uncertainty of change overwhelms us, how do we rely on our foundation of faith? When anxiety bubbles up inside of us, how do we remember these examples from Matthew and Exodus? How do we turn back towards God, rather than argue with or test God?

Unpredictability, unprecedented times, disruption, loss, chaos. These words, and the meanings they carry behind them, are incredibly hard for many of us. There’s a

reason why humans describe ourselves as “creatures of habit.” We sit at the same pews during worship. We frequent the same cafes and restaurants. We follow our routines – the same route back home, the same evening regimen before bed. We maintain the same values, the same beliefs. Try as we might not to, we engage in the same circular debates and complaints and criticisms. “If only they weren’t like this, things would be much better” or “the world is an awful place, and I’m scared about the future,” or “everything in the news is just depressing, and I can’t force myself to look” or...the list goes on and on. These narratives came easily to me when I was writing my sermon. Why? Because I have thought them, shared them with others, and even relied on them a little too much and a little too often.

Change is very hard for humans. Our brains have evolved to seek consistency and predictability. The rules we learn and the habits we perfect over the course of our lifetime are very hard to break. Even if the choices we make aren’t particularly helpful or adaptive—say, driving too aggressively or staring at our phones or TVs hours after bedtime or raising our voices when we’re overwhelmed—man, it is really hard to let them go. It is really hard to let them go and change these rules and habits into something new, something more aligned with our values and with the visions of who we want to be—the visions of how we want the world to be.

It’s hard, but it’s not impossible.

SNEUCC conference - Rev. Darrell Goodwin, Executive Conference Minister,
 “More might mean relinquishinig control.”

If we allow fear to be our authority—our decision-maker, our guide, our companion—we end up worshipping at the altar of an idol—not of God. Fear leads us into

a false temple. It whispers lies and depicts a warped vision of the world, one that is fundamentally limited and restrictive. God does not lie to us. God does not depict a warped vision of the world. God is not fundamentally limited or restrictive. God is truth. God is hope. God is vast love and capacious possibility. God's temple is the Kin-dom, wherein all Creation thrives and no one is denied access and opportunity.

Our authority does not come from fear. Our authority does not come from human-made social expectations that, in the case of the Pharisees and religious elders, say, *"this is the only and absolute way the world should be. These are the unquestionable, undeniable rules and structures of how we operate and treat each other."* Our authority does not come from scarcity that, in the case of the Israelites and Moses, says, *"I must hoard my resources. I must believe that I will never get what I need. I must believe that I will never get enough."*

In our modern context, our authority does not come from mega-corporations, AI tech entrepreneurs, and billionaires with the power and privilege to buy the world that suits them and their whims. Our authority does not come from mindless consumption at all costs, from plastics and fossil fuel companies, from keeping-up-with-the-Joneses behavior that leads to the degradation and exploitation of Creation. Our authority does not come from political fear-mongering that scapegoats our immigrant and transgender neighbors and pits human against human, God's child against God's child.

Our authority, sole authority, comes from God. Thank God we have Christ's firm foundation under our feet! What are the new commandments Jesus tells us to follow? "Love your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself."

The next time we find ourselves giving into the false authority of fear, prayerfully consider this question: “By making this decision, am I loving God with all my heart and loving my neighbor as myself?” *“By making this decision, am I loving God with all my heart and loving my neighbor as myself?”* If the answer is no to one or both, then pause. Consider how your decisions align with your values. Take a breath, and ask God for support and guidance. Remind yourself that you are not yours alone - you are God’s beloved. You belong to, and have access to, the Kin-dom. Rescind the illusion of control you have over your life and over other people. Come to the feet of Christ and rest. Graciously and gratefully accept God’s authority to lead us into truthy, hope, vast love, capacious possibility, where all Creation thrives.

Thank you, God. Thank you, God.

Amen.