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## *Lincoln Continentals and Living in Times of Terror*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener**  
**The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 24, Year B**

The members of Girl Scout Troop 1017 did not like riding in the back seat of Mrs. Moore's Lincoln Continental. More precisely, we did not like crouching on the floor boards or sitting on our neighbor's lap or cramming ourselves into that small space above the headrests usually reserved for sleeping children on long road trips in the years before anyone knew better. We did not like this. We did not like it at all. Because while Mrs. Moore's car was big—it was a virtual pontoon boat—while Mrs. Moore's car was big, it was not big enough for all of us Girl Scouts to have a seat, much less a seat belt. So on the Monday afternoons when we had our troop meetings, we would race out of school towards the parking lot, shoving each other out of the way while shrieking, "I call shotgun!" A casual observer might have taken this for the behavior of cliquish preteens all vying to become Queen Bee, all trying to show who was boss. But the truth was, we were scared. We were scared. You see, Mrs. Moore had a way of gunning it when she pulled out of the school parking lot so that if you weren't holding on to something pretty substantial you might end up with a split lip or a black eye. And so on Mondays, we Girl Scouts pushed and shoved and jockeyed for position, each of us hoping we would be the lucky one to sit buckled in safely at Mrs. Moore's right side.

My hunch is, this is some of what's happening with James and John in this morning's gospel lesson. Not that they're trying to cram into a Lincoln Continental with Jesus and the rest of the Twelve (that is a compelling image, by the way, and one that I may come back to it in some future sermon). What I'm getting at right now, though, is that this really pretty cringeworthy story about James and John ingratiating themselves with Jesus, this story in which they basically call "shotgun" to make sure that they, rather than the other disciples, will be the ones sitting closest to Jesus in his glory—this story is not just a story about James and John being power hungry. There's something more to it than that, something that has a lot to do with what sent Troop 1017 racing across the parking lot on Monday afternoons. Something that has a lot to do with what has many of us waking up each morning with racing thoughts and racing hearts.

Not unlike us, Jesus' first followers lived in a time of great turmoil. It was a time of terror, really, a time in which every day brought the people of God new horrors and oppressions at the hands of the Roman Empire. Then Jesus appeared, and the disciples and many others came to believe that he was the long awaited Messiah, the one who would set them free from all that bound them, including their crippling fears. By the time we get to the part of Mark's gospel where we find today's story about James and John, though, things have started to go south. Jesus has just told his disciples for the third time that he must suffer and die. He is not going to be a strongman who will take down the Romans by force. No wonder the disciples are testy and jockeying for position, trying to secure their futures. They have given up everything to follow him. How, now, will they live?

How, now, will they live? How, now, will we live? How will we live in our own time of terror, these anxious, edgy days filled with wars and rumors of wars, riddled with political animosity and the threat of civil unrest and hurricane after hurricane after hurricane? How, now, will we live? We can get "grabby," filling our pantries and our portfolios, padding our resumes and our friend groups, stockpiling toilet paper. We can pursue our own security at all costs. We can push toward the front of the line and try to commandeer the best seats. We can seek to dominate others.

We can do this. Or . . . or, we can take our cue from what Jesus tells his first followers in this morning's gospel lesson. Responding to the other disciples' rage at James' and John's power play ("Grant us to sit, [Jesus], one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory")—responding to the other disciples' rage over this, Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their

great ones are tyrants over them.” In other words, *Look guys, I know all these big wigs in charge of the Roman Empire love to throw their weight around, they love to crush people, especially the weakest and most vulnerable, anyone who seems like they don’t belong. I know this and you know this, and it makes sense that, in this kind of environment, the thing to do is to do likewise, to look out for number one, to do whatever it takes to get to the top and then stay there.*

But . . . but . . . then Jesus says something that changes everything. *But it is not so among you. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant . . .* Take a moment just to let this line sink in. It is not so among you. Do you hear the Good News in this statement? Can you hear the salvation, the way out that it offers? It is not so among you! The Empire may still wield its sword. Rulers will continue to abuse their power. Armies will crush their opponents. The bullies of our world will keep picking on the little people. The insiders will try to banish the outsiders. Haters gonna hate; oppressors gonna oppress. *But it is not so among you.*

Notice that this is not just an aspirational statement, it’s a declarative one. Jesus is not saying, *It doesn’t have to be so among you; maybe it won’t be so among you; I hope it won’t be so among you.* No, Jesus is saying, *It is not so among you.* Already, Jesus tells his followers—already, despite your panic when you hear me talk about the horrible death I’m going to die, despite the fact that the Romans are circling in closer and closer with their terrifying agenda—despite all of this, *It is not so among you.* Because when you left your fishing boats to follow me, you pledged your allegiance to a higher authority, one whose service is perfect freedom. Perfect freedom. And so you are not trapped. You are not doomed. You need not give in to fear and despair. You need not put your trust in tyrants. You need not copy their power plays. And neither need we, my friends. Neither need we. Why? Because we are a people made for love. Because in Christ Jesus, we are a people made not to dominate but to give ourselves away in service to one another and to our broken and troubled world. And so when faced with the terror that lays waste at noonday or at 3 a.m., during the college admissions process or at the ballot box or in the stock market or in our own living rooms—when faced with such terror, we can let go of our death grip on self-advancement, self-promotion, self-protection, and control and can instead reach out to one another in love.

When Freddie Nole was 17, he and some friends used a toy gun to hold up a candy store, snatching \$12 in change.<sup>[1]</sup> Charged as an adult for this crime, Nole spent the next fifty years of his life in prison. That’s right—fifty years in prison for stealing \$12. When he finally got out, Nole says, he was excited to make the most of the time he had left. He started applying for jobs, seeking some way to make a contribution to his family and to society. But he kept getting turned down because of his record. Nole became discouraged. He became afraid—afraid of the long hours with nothing to do, afraid of becoming a burden to his wife, afraid of living a life devoid of purpose. And so he decided to do something different, something different from anything else he had tried. He decided to start offering free car rides to inmates who were being released from prison and had no one else to come pick them up. The first time he drove back to the facility where he himself had been incarcerated, Nole said, was a nerve-wracking experience. The sights and sounds and smells of fifty years of agony threatened to overwhelm him. But then he busied himself, helping the man he came to drive home find some fresh clothes to put on, giving him a hot breakfast and a listening ear—then he busied himself in service of another, and the anxiety lessened.

I don’t know whether or not Freddie Nole drives a Lincoln Continental, but I do know this: His car is a freedom mobile. It’s a freedom mobile. Freddie offers freedom rides, not just for others, but for himself. And it is great. He is great. In the time of trial, may we dare to be like him, following in the path of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> “When people need a ride home from prison, he’s waiting outside with a car,” The Washington Post, October 12, 2024.