

Sermon
Epiphany 4-B
January 31, 2021
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
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Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

You've heard the Texas saying: "Big hat, no cattle"? Today that's what the people in the synagogue are saying about the Scribes: All they can do is trot out the traditional prayers and rituals to maintain the status quo in their synagogues.

I want first of all to suggest this is not a bad thing: the ego lives in constant fear of the fragility of life and finds comfort in rituals and creeds. This stabilizing function of religion is important to us all.

But when religion **stops** at making me comfortable, it becomes a **barrier to experiencing God and God's call to grow.**

Jesus, in contrast to the Scribes, proclaims the arrival of the Realm of God and then ushers people into an experience of God by healing the sick. And not surprisingly, the people **NOTICE** this: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

Jesus has big hat AND cattle! Mark says: "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

Because the gospels are full of such healings, even the most skeptical New Testament scholar believes Jesus had a powerful healing ministry. During the first centuries, the Church continued to believe the Risen Christ is present to heal through the Spirit. James writes to his church and says: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and **the Lord will raise them up....**

But long before the modern era the mainline Church dropped any expectation of spiritual healing. Of course, we clergy and church members kept asking folks to pray for us, and we kept promising to pray for them, and maybe we did, but many no longer expected their prayers to do very much.

After all, we've all been burned: someone we loved with all our heart died before their time in spite of our prayers. Maybe it was better to put all our trust in the medical profession, even though it has also let us down.

We lost confidence in spiritual healing as we lost the felt sense that the Christ is present in our lives. **Faith turned from experiencing God in Christ, to believing certain doctrines and creeds about God in Christ. In short, we became like the Scribes, not a bad thing, but not the best thing.**

But in every generation God has his witnesses, so I've mentioned before Agnes Sanford: a doughty, middle-aged, ordinary woman, wife of an Episcopal priest, wrote a book in 1947 called, The Healing Light, describing her practice of praying for the sick. (Mass Market Paperback \$7.95; Kindle \$3.75)

I highly recommend this book, not because I expect us all to take up the healing ministry, **but because of her starting point, her spiritual worldview:** She writes: "God is both within us and without us. He is the Source of all life; the Creator of universe...and of unimaginable depths of inter-stellar space and light-years without end. **But God is also the indwelling life of our own little selves."**

Then she offers this simple metaphor: "And just as a whole world full of electricity will not light a house unless the house itself is prepared to receive that electricity, so the infinite and eternal life of God cannot help us unless we are prepared to receive that life within ourselves. Only the amount of God that we can get in us will work for us."

She goes on to say: "The kingdom of God is within you, said Jesus. And it is the Indwelling Light, the secret Place of the Consciousness of the Most High.... Learning to live in the Kingdom of Heaven is learning to turn on the light of God within." The Healing Light, page19

In short, Agnes Sanford, raised by Missionary parents in China, was a modern-day mystic, who operates at a higher level of consciousness, higher than ordinary mind, what Paul calls the Mind of Christ. This requires an active practice of prayer and a willingness to open one's heart to the work of the Spirit of Christ within us.

During this long pandemic, our chief problem, next to the virus itself, is fear. Day in and day out we are bombarded with the devastation of Covid. Fear is front and center in our minds every time we look at the news.

One positive result of this fear is it can make us wear masks, practice social distancing, handwashing, and to get the vaccine when we can.

One negative result of this or any fear is that it separates us from our faith in Christ. **The more we focus on the causes of our fear, the less we focus on the presence and faithfulness of Christ.**

Just ask yourself: during an average day which do you spend more time doing: stressing over the virus or meditating on the healing presence of Christ?

I certainly have days in which stressing wins out over meditating—and the effects of that are an increase of stress and the lowering of my immune system.

Jesus encourages us to share his worldview of the reality of the Realm of God in all times and places, as we move away from our modern worldview that the virus has more reality than God.

So here is a very simple true story I read in a spiritual journal.

A man was working inside a large water-tight container in a ship. As he was doing his work the hatch of the container slammed shut locking him inside. This was before cellphones and he was the only one working in the bow. Naturally, he became quite anxious and began frantically to try to loosen some bolts on the hatch, but nothing happened.

Then, he remembered his faith: so he sat down in that dark container and began to pray. But his prayer wasn't: oh God get me out of here—that would have only raised his fear by focusing on all the bad things that could happen to him.

But he meditated on the goodness, love, and power of God. As he did, he felt his faith grow and he knew he was not alone in the container: **He was in there with Christ.** There was no need to panic. As his faith rose his fear diminished, and the solution to his problem appeared to him and he was able to free himself.

He claims he was able to pray this way because he had a daily practice of centering himself, morning and night, on the Truth, Life, and Love of God present in Jesus Christ.

Here's an experiment: to spend more time in prayer than I spend time in worry.

So here's the thing: We are living in a dark time—but we are not alone in there. We are in there with Christ.