

St, John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany
4 February 2018

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

There are words here that are important for us to hear and to think about from Isaiah. The real prophecy has something to do with God's position as Creator and above all of creation - all of its worlds, all of its splendor, all of its beauty, and all of its problems. *"It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants (that might be you and me) are like grasshoppers. It is God who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to live in."* That's interesting. The German expression for the firmament is *Himmelszelt* - the heaven tent. Of course it has holes in it; those are the stars.

This is for us in our day: *"who brings princes to naught (that could be presidents), and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble."* It's the invitation for us to remember that all of the emotion and the exercise that we get about politics, God is still larger than all of that. There's always hope; there's always promise. But that must be held in tension with what it is Jesus does in the gospel today when he encounters Peter's mother-in-law. Now how do you get a mother-in-law? You marry her child. And here is the pope, the spiritual descendant of Peter, not being allowed to be...oh, you know how it goes! You also know that scripture tells us that Jesus had brothers and sisters. That does a number on the "Ever Virgin Mary" too, doesn't it? *[laughter]*

Oh well! Are these things really important to what it is we believe, or is there something more here? Jesus encounters people who have been ill, who are sick, who are not well, and health is in this text, I believe, very closely related to the business of casting out demons. Now demons are interesting. Jesus' problem with demons is that they know who he is. It's the demons who say, *"You are the Son of God!"* That's what the Church wants us to say. That's why we have creeds and all the rest of it. But Jesus recognized the demoniacs as people who are possessed by something other than the truth of the Creator God, and that means you and me from time to time. When the space that is supposed to be occupied by God's truth is occupied by something else - no matter how good it looks, if it's less, it's demonic. That nationalism is more important than mercy, that clan is more important than inclusion.

Did you hear in the epistle lesson how it is understood that the gospel can be communicated? It does not say in 1 Corinthians, *"Make them speak English the way we do."* It says, *"If you want to communicate to them, it might be worth your while to learn to speak Spanish"* - a language of our country, by the way. Are you aware that everybody born in Puerto Rico travels with an American passport? That is our language. Not spoken by the majority perhaps, but it is a language of those who are born in the United States. They're not foreigners. They don't come from anywhere else, and they are not immigrants. They may be descendants of slaves who were dragged there, and certainly as we have seen nationally, in the response to natural disaster there, they are considered second-class citizens. They're still waiting for electricity.

Demons will tell you another truth. Jesus' response to the demons is this: *"I don't want to hear your twisted and perverted take on reality."* He will not listen to the garbage. Jesus has time only for one thing and that is speaking the truth, speaking it to all people - to those in power and to those who are completely on the bottom levels of society, to the downtrodden, the poor and the disenfranchised, the disabled, and everybody else. Jesus' job and our example is to speak the truth of God's love to all people at all times everywhere and to speak it in love - that's the hard part for me.

The question is also asked in the text today: What is the reward for this? *"If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no grounds for boasting. Rather, this is an obligation laid on me."* This isn't anything that is going to get me Mary Kay's pink Cadillac. *"If I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if it's not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission."* This is who we are as Christians: speakers of truth in love to all people. That'll do a number on politics in a hurry, because apparently in the days in which we live, speaking the truth is a very, very difficult thing,

So here is the truth. The truth is that God creates the entire world and everybody in it, and all people in this world are your sisters and your brothers. Period. Hypocrisy is not truth, and no matter how many people you can get

to agree on a thing, if you are not speaking the truth the demonic will find its expression.

Let us just ask for a moment what happened in Germany in the 30s. Truth was not spoken about Jews, gypsies, gay people, and people born with anomalies - physically or mentally challenged people. The truth was not spoken about them as God's children. They were "problems" for the nation and the empire, and therefore they were dispensable. As long as the lie was told, the ovens were built, society was organized, trains were filled, and the world was filled with the stench of burning human flesh. Do yourself a terrible favor sometime and visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. There is a room there filled simply with shoes, and it is still redolent of the odor of destruction by arrogant evil which was given political power ensconced in nationalism and allowed to rampage.

Jesus isn't kidding when he admonishes evil because he knows what it can do. And I think what we need to do as we come closer to Lent - and probably all of our lives and not just the forty days of Lent - we need to practice understanding that evil very happily will find a home at the bottom of every one of our hearts given a chance, and that the business of making sure that evil does not take residence in us or is kicked out of us, is a full-time job. We must always all of us everywhere be careful of our own hypocrisies because we have them, of our own prejudices because we have them, of our own ignorance because we are, and our own sinfulness because we are sinners. We know this.

And Jesus' simple solution is to not listen to the demonic, to proclaim the truth in love, and move on and do it everywhere you go - in high places, in low places, in society, in the church, out of the church, in the world wherever you may be. We know what happens when we don't do it.

It wasn't long ago a ship filled with political refugees - Jews and others - came to the shores of the United States and was turned away. Asylum was not granted. The ship went back to Germany and many of its passengers were killed by Hitler and the Nazis. Truth was not spoken and love was not known. A lot of other things were spoken, a lot of other things were known. Laws were obeyed, boundaries were kept, and "*you can't do that*" was understood, and "*they're not ours*" and "*this is not our responsibility*" etc., etc., etc. Does that matter if you're on the ship? Well, friends, we are all on that ship, and we make a mistake if we think that anybody is the captain of that ship other than our Lord himself!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.