

## Sermon for Epiphany +4, January 28, 2024

I have to admit that I kind of struggled with the readings today. I usually like to spend part of the sermon explaining the Scripture passages and the other part explaining how they're relevant to us. Because, if they're not relevant to us, why are we bothering? And today I found it a bit hard. All the passages contain things that are true and I could give you some background about them, but I was finding it hard to see how they are relevant to us today. So here's where I ended up.

In the gospel, Jesus (who we believe is the prophet foretold by Moses, the prophet like him that God would send, that we read about today) teaches with authority and casts out a demon. By the way, the demon knew exactly who he was. It isn't enough to believe in Jesus. We also need to commit to following Jesus. Even today, Jesus' teachings still hold authority for us and he still has authority over all unclean spirits, or demons. But I don't think that any of us in this church are suffering from actual demons. I've seen no sign of it.

So I started thinking of metaphorical demons and I know I've spoken before about demons of addiction, demons of jealousy, and so on. But what kept coming to my mind today was fear. The demon of fear. Especially fear of the unknown, or of the future. Fear, of course, is a perfectly normal and natural response in our bodies and minds to threats. If we are threatened with a danger, our body releases adrenalin, which puts us on high alert to deal with the danger. We tend to do one of three things: fight, flight or freeze. And in different situations, different responses are needed. I'm sure you can all think of examples. Run away from wildfires or floods, if an animal jumps on you, fight. If there's some marauding danger, stay put in a safe place. And in caveman days that was about all we needed.

But we live in a more complex world now and the threats we see are not usually the kind that can be dealt with by these responses. And unfortunately, the adrenalin from fear that sets us up to respond quickly, also tends to cloud our thinking a bit. Sometimes we run when we should hide, or fight when we should run or hide when we should fight or run. Of just run around in panic or lash out at each other when we should work together calmly to solve a problem. Because with today's bigger problems, we need to be calm and think to deal with the problems facing us. Prayer and worship help with calming us. And we need each other. Today's challenges require teamwork. And the demon of fear works against those things and it also imagines threats where there are none.

Here's a story. Once when our kids were little, Charles and I met up with our good friends Max and Ellen and their kids and went for a hike. Max and Ellen had suggested this place they'd heard about, a model forest, so we packed a lunch and met up there and we had a great time. But it was a weird forest, a managed forest. All the trees were the same kind, and the same age and they were planted on a grid, each 6 feet apart, in straight lines and straight rows, as far as the eye could see. Very little undergrowth. So we went cavorting around with the kids, playing tag, exploring a bit, stopping for a nice late lunch, and so on.

Around about 3:00pm, it occurred to us that we were lost. We were all seasoned hikers and we knew how to not get lost. You pay attention to the path you take, the landmarks, the sun direction, all that stuff. But none of that applied here. There were no paths, just this grid. No landmarks, just more or less identical trees. The day was overcast so no sun. We were in an unprecedented situation, trees as far as the eye could see in all directions, and we had no idea which way to go to get back to the cars. And it was still a pretty cool time of year, we had no shelter, we had 6 small children and not much food. Scary!

So we started to discuss the situation. We were all worried, but because there were 4 of us, it was easier to think straight and not panic. The best thing would be for some other hiker to come by and say, "Go that way." But we decided not to wait around, especially as we hadn't seen anyone all day. We also agreed we needed to stick together. We decided to pick a direction and keep going that way, because the wood was bound to come to an end eventually. And you could keep going straight because the trees were in straight lines.

Well, after what seemed like a very long time, we came to a dirt road. That was great! Where there are roads, they usually go somewhere, usually back to a main road. The question then was, left or right? Fortunately, by that time we were paying a lot more attention and as we were debating, the sun came out briefly and cast a shadow. We were able to figure out where the sun was and we knew it was in the west or southwest. I remembered that we had turned north into the parking lot, so we were parked to the south of the woods, so we knew we needed to go south and we could see which direction was heading south. So we went that way. And it ended happily back at the parking lot. But we had an anxious time for a while.

I thought of this story partly because it's about a scary situation, and because it has similarities with the place we as a church find ourselves in now. We and our parents and grandparents and their grandparents and so on, know how to keep a church going and thriving under normal circumstances. Our parents learned it from their parents and we learned it from them. But our society now is so much different than it has been in living memory that not all those methods still work for us. Like us knowing how to not get lost in the woods, but these woods were so different that most of those skills didn't work.

In past generations, each generation would take over from the last one. I think of Connie Backman, who is chairing the cemetery committee, which her father served on and probably for generations back. I've heard stories of people long gone who mentored some of our current volunteers. Old Donnie Strople and Bob Richey (who is still with us, at almost 100) taught Vic Eisan how to care for the cemetery, and Vic taught Keith. Joan Schnare taught Sarah how to do the sanctuary guild work, and she has taught more people who are now doing it. Eleanor Brunt, who was 100 when she died, my first year here, told me stories of church suppers, run by women long since gone, but they mentored the next generation.

Only now we're short a generation or two to hand it on to. So now what? Back then, about 75 % of people went to church and we thought that would always be the way. Now it's more like 15%. We're in a whole new world. We're in a multicultural, multifaith world our ancestors never dreamed of. Some of their methods are still good, but some not. Like us in the woods.

So what do we as a church do to face this scary new situation and figure out where we go from here in this new world? Well, let's look at our hike. The first thing is to notice there's a problem, or a challenge. One of us adults suddenly thought, "I don't know where we are or how to get back." And we compared notes and realised none of us did. We were lost. Identifying that there is a problem or challenge and what the problem is is step one.

Then what to do? We could have had a good fight and relieved our nerves. We could have said to Max and Ellen, "You brought us here. You should have checked it out first. It's your fault we're lost." Then we would have been angry and upset, not working together and the kids would also have been upset. We never did tell them we were lost. And we didn't fight. The church shouldn't do that either. It's not helpful to start assigning blame and taking sides and having big fights. It just wastes our time and energy and makes things worse.

We could have all panicked and run in different directions. Or we could have been stubborn and said, "I think that's the right way and I'm going that way no matter what you say and whether you come or not." We didn't do that. We decided it was most important to stick together. That is also true of the church. If we can stick together in this new situation and work together on a solution, recognising that it might not ultimately be the best one, but staying together and refraining from getting into a fight or blaming each other if it doesn't work, we will do much better. When we're together, we're able to keep our spirits up and not panic. We can pool our ideas. We have support. It's much better that way.

We paid attention to the signs. The sun only came out briefly. If we hadn't been paying attention, we might have missed the sign that told us which way to go. We in the church need to pay attention, too, to the signs God is giving us. And God is sending us signs telling us to carry on being the church and doing the work of the church, if only we pay attention. In the last year we have received \$235,000 we didn't expect, we have gained I don't know how many new members, around 20, and new people have stepped up to leadership. These are all signs of life and health and that God has a future for us.

What we really wanted out there in the woods was a guide and we didn't get one. The church, of course, has a guide. We have a guide who teaches with authority, Jesus, the Son of God, the prophet like Moses, who led his people out of bondage, through the wilderness into the promised land. The psalm today says that if we follow the teachings of the Lord we won't go astray. And the epistle reminds us to stick together and not do things that will hurt each other. We have a guide in Jesus, who is still with us. And by prayer and worship, we invite him into whatever situations we find ourselves in. And when we do that, he is still able to cast out the demons of fear that make us freeze or fight or flee away.

When we find ourselves in unfamiliar situations, which our past experience doesn't tell us how to navigate, if we can remember to stick together instead of fighting, listen to each other and cooperate, be kind to each other, support each other, and work together instead of working against each other, in other words, follow Jesus' teachings, we will do fine. And above all, turn to Jesus and ask for help and signs to follow. The church has faced many changes over the centuries, unprecedented situations, and we are facing one now. And if we remember to love one another and seek the Lord with all our heart, we will come through fine and find our way home. God bless us on the way.