

The Sunday Missive -- January 30, 2022

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Hymn 440 Blessed Jesus, at thy word

Blessèd Jesus, at thy word we are gathered all to hear thee;
Let our hearts and souls be stirred now to seek and love and fear thee;
By thy teachings pure and holy, drawn from earth to love thee solely.

All our knowledge, sense and sight lie in deepest darkness shrouded,
Till thy Spirit breaks our night with the beams of truth unclouded;
Thou alone to God canst win us; thou must work all good within us.

Gracious Lord, thyself impart! Light of Light, from God proceeding,
Open thou our ears and heart, help us by thy Spirit's pleading.
Hear the cry thy Church upraises; hear, and bless our prayers and praises.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Psalm 71

In you, O Lord, I take refuge* ***Let me never be put to shame.***

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me* ***Incline your ear to me and save me.***

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me* ***For you are my rock and my fortress.***

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked* ***From the grasp of the unjust and cruel.***

For you, O Lord, are my hope* ***My trust, O Lord, from my youth.***

My mouth is filled with your praise* ***And with your glory all day long.***

Do not cast me off in the time of old age* ***Do not forsake me when my strength is spent.***

O God, do not be far from me* ***O my God, make haste to help me!***

But I will hope continually* ***And will praise you yet more and more.***

My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you* ***My soul also, which you have rescued.***

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Hymn 510 Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;
Kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours.

See how we trifle here below, fond of these earthly toys:
Our souls, how heavily they go, to reach eternal joys.

In vain we tune our formal songs, in vain we strive to rise:
Hosannas languish on our tongues, and our devotion dies.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;
Come, shed abroad a Savior's love, and that shall kindle ours.

Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

And I Always Will -- Epiphany 4C

In this season of Epiphany, as we tell the story of a bright star, we can also remember that God has indeed fulfilled the promise to Abraham, whose children would be numbered as the stars in the heavens. And in time, and in time, as the song goes, we will all become stars. So how will we shine? We celebrate the diversity of our shinings, even as they challenge us.

Most of us want to belong, to a group with a specific identity and defined limits; but we hear God calling us to reach outside ourselves and embrace outsiders in charity as if they were our own. The specific group God proposes is all of Creation. The old saw goes, “Man proposes; God disposes,” but the reverse is also true. The benevolent Higher Power of the cosmos has set the forces of Creation in motion, but we are the ones who must steer and power ourselves toward the Good. And if we would do it according to what we know as righteousness, we must get up and get going with the work of loving embrace of the many, not just the some.

The prophet Jeremiah hears a call that is undeniable and irresistible. He tries to object: “But I’m just a child! I can’t possibly make plans and take actions so broad and bold. My place is here at home, safe with my family.” God’s answer: “Fear not. Get up. Get going with the work of prophetic ministry.”

Each of our readings today tells us in no uncertain terms that we have to grow up, move out of the house and take on the uncomfortable, risky challenges of our calling. We have to shine out in the world so that our light can be seen beyond the narrow confines of our snug burrows.

The proverb says, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” When we are children, our concept of God begins with our families – especially our parents. We could glance in their faces and immediately tell if things were going well, or if there was trouble ahead. If we wanted things to go well, we had to do whatever it took to bring smiles, if possible to those all-important faces. If the faces of our grownups were angry or disapproving, we were afraid. If they were smiling and encouraging, we were happy. A simple and powerful correlation. And if we were lucky, we did not live in fear of them, *per se*; we lived in fear of their disapproval, and learned to avoid it. The same goes for our proverbial fear of God: it is wise to avoid sin.

Avoiding sin as a grownup takes some skill and some practice. We have to learn to live with paradoxes and disappointments of all flavors. We have to learn to share our joys as well as our fears. We have to learn to let go of all that is not God. Jesus tells us to keep a childlike faith in the goodness of God and the power of neighbor love to justify and thereby save us, but that does not mean we’re supposed to be childish. As our faith develops, we make the transition from our parents’ faces as the touchstone of fear and faith, to the face of God as mediator between ourselves as individuals and ourselves as participants in the wide world of Creation. Out there, the choices of faith over fear will always be before us, subtle, complicated and

often misleading. Yes, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but not its end. Wisdom's end is love, or as we learned, perhaps in Sunday school, charity. If we were fortunate, we might have even earned a quarter by memorizing:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing... When I was a child, I spake as a child, I thought as a child I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

The end, the end-all and be-all, without which nothing, not just matters, but nothing is, is love. As much as we employ this passage to celebrate milestones with those closest to us, it is also very much about the kind of risky love for those who are different, who are 'other;' love that can feel oh so uncomfortable. That's what makes Jesus' hometown crowd so angry. He insists that God's first priority is for us to go out and love strangers.

We stars cannot possibly shine unless we burn with an inner fire. Our worship life must be vibrant – we must be a family who nurture faith in one another. We cannot possibly shine out unless we are good at stoking each other's inner fires – our mutual support must be attentive and grateful. And our corporate life must be energetic, creative, responsible and generous; we must be a family that takes care of itself. Thus we will gather next week for our annual checkup. Nurturing faith, nourishing and celebrating life and taking care of business: that is a good description of a thriving family. We see God in the faces of one another.

But each of our stars was made for a purpose even greater. Perhaps you've heard this story before; I hope it bears repeating. When my kids' dear mother and I accepted within ourselves and, with some very careful and wise help, admitted to each other that we were unable to maintain the marriage commitments we had made, our son Jim was only six. Once the conclusion was reached and the decision made to part, his mom and I spent a good deal more time together in prayer and with our counselor, discovering ways to part charitably and maintain our unquestionable commitment to bring our children up peacefully. We asked and God helped

us to set aside self-righteousness and make a new commitment: the promise to each make it our business to see that each of the three kids had the best possible relationship with the *other* parent. I won't say we immediately entered a flow state of happy concord, but our prayers were answered, and this formula still seems to be working. It has only gotten easier. And now we all look forward to the times we get to see each other.

At the time, I was used to putting Jim to bed each night, reading a story, and telling him I loved him. In my increasing fear of what life would be like after our separation, when I was to move two whole miles across town to my own garret, to the words "I love you" I began adding "and I always will." Well my six-year-old let me get away with this... once. The second time I said it, he rolled over, looked me in the face and said, "Dad, even before God made me, I knew that we would always love each other."

That shut me up, I tell you what. That was about the last time I tried any theological/eschatological theorizing out on him. It was a simple, childlike thing to say, but childish? No. He got it, the third part of the Trinity: the Holy Ghost Power, the means by which God puts our stars to shining, the basic ingredient that will fulfill us. That something is the spiritual action of love. It is the action God took in coming to live with and love the very other: us, and what God would have us imitate in the world.

Like Jeremiah, we would rather stay protected and simple. Like St. Paul, we want to boast of our singular faith and hope, because they are real. Like the Nazareans, we want to see some local miracles, pronto. But God is whispering in each of our ears: 'A word to the wise: Take action. Go out, find the neighbors you don't know yet, next door and across the globe and love them, especially the ones who make you uncomfortable. Disregard the consequences for yourself. Charity is the only thing that never dies. And by the way, fear not. You will never be alone. I will be with you, even unto the ages of ages.'

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts' longings for the healing of our world. Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, ***Amen.***

Hymn 526 Let Saints on earth in concert sing

Let saints on earth in concert sing with those who work is done;
For all the servants of our King in heaven and earth are one.

One family, we dwell in him, one Church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream, the narrow stream of death.

E'en now by faith we join our hands with those that went before,
And greet the ever-living bands on the eternal shore.

Jesus, be thou our constant Guide; then, when the word is given,
Bid Jordan's narrow stream divide, and bring us safe to heaven.

Mindful

Every day I see or I hear
something that more or less

kills me with delight,
that leaves me like a needle

in the haystack of light.
It is what I was born for — to look, to listen,

to lose myself inside this soft world—
to instruct myself over and over

in joy, and acclamation.
Nor am I talking about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary, the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations, Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself, how can you help

but grow wise with such teachings
as these — the untrimmable light

of the world, the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made out of grass?

Mary Oliver