

The Sunday Missive – February 4, 2024

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Hymn 529 In Christ there is no East or West

In Christ, there is no East or West, in him no South or North,
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

Join hands, disciples of the faith, whate'er your race may be!
Who serves my Father as his child is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West, in him meet South and North,
All Christly souls are one in him, throughout the whole wide earth.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24CsRD1BMhM>

The Collect of the Day

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty
of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son
our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of
the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you
from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of
the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its
inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a
curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to
naught, 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. To whom then will you
compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings
out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he
is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Psalm 147

Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to God* ***How pleasant it is to honor the Lord with praise!***

Who heals the brokenhearted* ***And binds up all their wounds.***

Who counts the number of the stars* ***And calls them all by their names.***

Great is the Lord and mighty in power* ***There is no limit to God's wisdom.***

O sing to the Lord with thanksgiving* ***Make music to God upon the harp.***

Who covers the heavens with clouds* ***And prepares rain for the earth;***

Who makes grass to grow upon the mountains* ***And green plants to serve humankind.***

Who provides food for flocks and herds* ***And for the young ravens when they cry.***

The Lord has pleasure in those who resist evil* ***In all those who await God's gracious favor. Hallelujah!***

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Hymn 593 Lord make us servants of your peace

Lord, make us servants of your peace: where there is hate,
may we sow love; where there is hurt, may we forgive;
where there is strife, may we make one.

Where all is doubt, may we sow faith; where all is gloom, may we sow hope;
where all is night, may we sow light; where all is tears, may we sow joy.

Jesus, our Lord, may we not seek to be consoled, but to console, nor look to
understanding hearts, but look for hearts to understand.

May we not look for love's return, but seek to love unselfishly,
for in our giving we receive, and in forgiving are forgiven.

Dying, we live, and are reborn through death's dark night to endless day;
Lord, make us servants of your peace, to wake at last in heaven's light.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFePl5ioYQo>

Mark 1:29-39

After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Unquestions – Epiphany 5B

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in. Scarcely are the creatures planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when the wind blows upon them and they wither. The tempest carries them off like stubble.

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? Who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name? We notice by the time the prophet known as Second Isaiah is writing, during the Israelites' exile by the rivers of Babylon (where they sat down and wept), it's no longer Adam who named all the animals – too much responsibility. It's God who is said to have named them. The biblical

narrative evolved as the ancients admitted just how far humanity was capable of straying from the peaceful intention of our Creator. In its interpretation, the narrative is still evolving to this day, like it or not. And we're still straying. Genesis 1:28, for example, reads: "God blessed them, and said to them, "Fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Talk about too much responsibility!

God, or Adam named for example the ostrich. The dictionary says it's from the Ancient Greek *strouthos megale*, big sparrow, which seems awfully understated. I bring up the ostrich for two reasons: One is the array of fascinating characteristics possessed by this, the largest of birds, who is also the fastest two-legged animal there is. With its acute eyesight and hearing, an ostrich can sense predators (such as lions) from very far away.

When pursued by a predator, ostriches have been known to reach speeds in excess of 43 miles an hour; and they can maintain a steady speed of 31 miles an hour over many miles. They also lay the biggest eggs of any creature, with the possible exception of some of our politicians.

When threatened, ostriches generally run away, but they can also cause serious injury or death with forward kicks from their powerful, sharp clawed legs. Each year, a number of ostrich ranchers in South Africa are killed by their own livestock.

Another reason I'm interested in ostriches today is the myth we human beings have made up about them to make it seem like we are not the most blithely ignorant, reality denying species on the planet. This myth likely began with Pliny the Elder, the Roman leader and naturalist who wrote that ostriches, "imagine, when they have thrust their head and neck into the dirt, that the whole of their body is concealed." Ostriches do not bury their heads in sand to avoid danger. That would not have resulted in the current success of their species. They do however nose around for sand and pebbles to swallow to help grind up their food. You and I might do that too if we, like the ostrich, had no teeth, and no blenders. When hiding from predators, Ostriches do however lay their heads and necks flat on the ground, so that from

a distance, they look like mounds of earth in the hazy heat of the savannah.

But everyone in our culture thinks we know what an “ostrich mentality” is: patent denial and/or blithe ignorance of potentially useful, or even vital information. The twin habit to this is of course making up things that we want to be true, or want others to think are true and declaring them to be useful or vital information, so as to manipulate each other for economic, political or emotional gain. We have several words for this: campaigning, advertising, and public relations, and now, governing. We avoid, we resist, we manage the truth, in an effort to expand our importance and control over life. But it is to no avail. Have you not known? Have you not heard? To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Whom would Jesus deport?

These questions are ironic; they are ‘unquestions.’ Isaiah knows the answers. Remember how the masterful cross-examiner Perry Mason, when he knew he had the villain caught in a skein of lies, would extract the final admission with a series of questions to which he knew the answers: “Isn’t it true, isn’t it true, isn’t it also true...” Our old rule of three again.

Or think of the cowardly lion: “Ain’t it the truth.” That’s not a question either, it’s an opportunity to accept truth. In Psalm 139 we sing, “O Lord, your knowledge is beyond my reach. Your thoughts are like the sand; to count them I must be eternal like you. Here Second Isaiah is telling us with his non-questions us what we already deeply know: we are, like the grasses, gone. We are not here to imitate God. Our hope and our purpose can never be greatness, again or otherwise. Our hope and purpose lie in self awareness, self examination, humility, moderation, peacemaking, healing, comforting, visiting, holding each other close, feeding, clothing, sheltering, forgiving, depicting, relating, entertaining, welcoming, and on and on.

These are plenty fulfilling activities for a lifetime: as numerous as the sand themselves. Let God fight the star wars, make the big bangs, move the continental plates. When and if we’ve done all we can do to care for this planet and its inhabitants, when all of nature and humanity is

nurtured and justly treated and reasonably happy; when our numbers are no longer wildly out of control and we're no longer obliterating other, inconvenient species, then we can all get together at a big potlatch to ask God what else we ought to be looking into, projectwise. But we have a long way to go and lots to do before that day dawneth.

The concept of patriotism has a different meaning for each of us. Some might veer toward the idea of 'Number One,' and even toss around the phrase, 'the greatest country in the world.' Others might think 'the greatest country in the world' is a dumb thing to boast: the writing on the wall, the pride before the fall. God's truth is that it's also patriotic to want us to be healthy, realistic and responsible. It's patriotic to be concerned about the ways in which we are among the least great, and be passionate about changing them, things like immoderate consumption, mass incarceration, income inequality, the unavailability of medical care and our environmental recklessness. Wanting to change those national characteristics is the true patriotism.

When we get up to heaven, let's say some angel -- as legend has it -- is at the pearly gates checking folks in. When we belly up to the desk there, and the angel says, "Where ya from, son?" We had better think twice before saying, "I'm from the greatest country in the world," just on the off chance they're serious about all that 'last shall be first' business. Who really wants to get sent to the remedial learning class, or worse? The goal is to have the presence of mind -- and the track record -- to say, "I'm from God's country... Ma'am."

And by the way, even if we've led what we think are socially responsible lives; even if we can say with the best of them: "Back where I come from there are folks who do nothing all day but good deeds. They are called 'Phila...' 'Phila...' er, Good Deed Doers," Even if we're that good, perhaps it might be better to let our boastings rest. I'm reminded of a New Yorker cartoon where some poor zhlub is standing expectantly at the pearly gates, where St Peter, with his long white robes and long white beard peers into his computer database screen dubiously: "Yes you say meek, but your record here says passive aggressive." I'm told what our left hands are doing is far more valuable and salutary than whatever our right hands have to boast about it.

Hymn 117 Brightest and best of the stars of the morning

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining,
Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker and Monarch and Savior of all.

Shall we then yield him, in costly devotion,
Odors of Edom, and offerings divine,
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gifts would his favor secure,
Richer by far is the heart's adoration,
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iaXtBgSY3A>

Who Can Be Trusted? A translation of Psalm 15

Lord, who can be trusted with power,
and who may act in your place?
Those with a passion for justice,
who speak the truth from their hearts;
who have let go of selfish interests
and grown beyond their own lives;
who see the wretched as their family
and the poor as their flesh and blood.
They alone are impartial
and worthy of the people's trust.
Their compassion lights up the whole earth,
and their kindness endures forever.

Stephen Mitchell