

## The Sunday Missive – January 21, 2024 The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

### Hymn 339 Deck thyself my soul with gladness

Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness, leave the gloomy haunts of sadness,  
Come into the daylight's splendor, there with joy thy praises render  
Unto him whose grace unbounded hath this wondrous banquet founded;  
High o'er all the heavens he reigneth, yet to dwell with thee he deigneth.

Sun, who all my life dost brighten; light, who dost my soul enlighten;  
Joy, the best that any knoweth; fount, whence all my being floweth:  
At thy feet I cry, my Maker, let me be a fit partaker  
Of this blessed food from heaven, for our good, thy glory, given.

Jesus, Bread of life, I pray thee, let me gladly here obey thee;  
Never to my hurt invited, be thy love with love requited;  
From this banquet let me measure, Lord, how vast and deep its treasure;  
Through the gifts thou here dost give me,  
As thy guest in heaven receive me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aq8-igIW1XY>

### The Collect of the Day

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

### Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three

days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

## **Psalm 62**

For God alone my soul in silence waits\* ***Truly, my hope is in the Lord.***

God alone is my rock and my salvation\* ***My stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.***

In God is my safety and my honor\* ***God is my strong rock and my refuge.***

Put your trust in God always, O you peoples\* ***Pour out your hearts before the one who is our refuge.***

Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath\* ***Even those of low estate cannot be counted upon.***

On the scales we are lighter than a breath\* ***All of us together.***

Put no trust in status; in riches take no empty pride\* *Though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it.*

The Lord has spoken once; twice have I heard it\* *That all true power belongs to God.*

Steadfast love is yours, O Lord\* *For you repay each of us according to our deeds.*

### **1 Corinthians 7:29-31**

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have spouses be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

### **Hymn 758 You have come down to the lakeshore**

You have come down to the lakeshore  
Seeking neither the wise nor the wealthy,  
But only asking for me to follow.

O Jesus, you have looked into my eyes,  
Kindly smiling, you've called out my name.  
On the sand I've abandoned my small boat;  
Now with you, I will seek other seas.

You know full well what I have, Lord;  
Neither treasure nor weapons for conquest,  
Just these my fishnets and will for working. (Refrain)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IAZS3jtfwc>

## **Mark 1:14-20**

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

### **Taking Care of the Fish -- Epiphany 3B**

The ultimate measure of godly people is not what they do in moments of comfort and convenience, but how they behave in times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk position, prestige and even life for the welfare of others

The news sometimes contains heartening stories about fishing – not for people. Legislation and agreed-upon practice put firm catch limits on all kinds of fish that are in danger of disappearing – hundreds of species to date, are meant to counter dangerous depletion of the stocks of fish on which we depend. One has to look fast, but in the congress, these have even occasionally been bi-partisan agreements. (We have smelling salts for those who have never heard that term before.) There are those who object to these agreements. Some fishermen, and representatives of fishing companies say that the government worries more about fish than it does about fisherpeople. Others respond: "If we don't worry about the fish, there won't be any fisherpeople."

These are knotty problems. But our tendency to treat Planet Earth

as a source of wealth, happiness and pleasure, instead of as the precious treasure it is has been the root of all our current conflicts. Overpopulation, income disparity, poverty, starvation and war are all caused by human beings fighting over natural resources, including human labor, and selfishly acquiring and hoarding them instead of seeking ways to preserve, strengthen and share them. Only when we learn to make that our goal, will human existence be sustainable. Only when human hearts are changed will our deadly habits of overconsumption and self-centeredness be broken. That's why Jesus calls the disciples to fish for people instead. As the psalmist insists, "Put no trust in status; in riches take no empty pride. Though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it. Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God." Or, as Frank Lloyd Wright put it, "Nature is the only body of God we see."

The business of forcing the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms to suffer the consequences of our misbehavior, poor organization and inability to get along with one another is an old one. Look at the King of the Ninevites in today's story, making all the animals go without food and wear scratchy sackcloth as a companion "sacrifice" to an angry god to atone for human sins. Everyone has to admit, if there are no fish, there sure as heck won't be any fishing, so we have to get together to agree on the best plan, do the right thing and let go of the result, or we are sunk. Doing the right thing and letting go of the result is something Jonah himself learned slowly. We're still pretty slow at it.

As for the Ninevites, only if their fasting was accompanied by policy changes could we say it changed God's mind. God's mind is uncannily similar to reality. It's no mystery why a band called The Brotherhood of Man had their biggest hit with a song called "United We Stand; Divided We Fall:" God does provide the occasional explicit example of what she wants, if only we have the presence of mind to realize it. Our inability to keep our minds and hearts open to reality are what lead Paul to insist that, if we don't change of our own free will, we all will be forced to change. "The time has grown short; the present form of this world is passing away." Our backs really are against the

wall. But will we be together? It's been almost exactly 2000 years since we've gotten Jesus' message; who could blame the deity for getting a little impatient with us?

Jesus starts his ministry when his cousin John gets arrested. A couple of weeks ago, we listened to the beginning of Mark's gospel... "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

Jesus picks up the refrain that John had been preaching: "Repent and Believe!" It was a dangerous thing to say. There every likelihood that Jesus wouldn't be arrested next. Not only that, he raises the stakes by recruiting people: Simon, Andrew, James and John and the rest, saying "Follow me." And they do. This movement is a direct threat to the powers who arrested John, but the disciples decide that following Jesus is the right thing to do, and accept the result to be what it will be.

We are in the cycle of the year that began with Advent. Through the cherished glory of the Nativity of Jesus, we moved into this time when we consider the implications of Christ's career on Earth. After Trinity Sunday, we will go into the other main cycle of the year, when we consider the implications of our response to Christ's career, leading up to his death, and the cherished glory of the Resurrection. These cycles happen every year, and we who are Christians measure our lives by them because, for us it is the right thing to do.

The scene from Mark is an on-the-ground look at the mechanics of the incarnate life of God; the presence within our midst of another entity, beyond human. If you've ever toured a big military airplane or ship or any big factory or kitchen, unless you worked there, you might have been struck by the combination of the grand and the mundane. There are huge machines and complicated processes that baffle the mind going on right next to old coffee cups, bathroom

signs, old pairs of gloves. This is Mark's story. God, the living God, is walking around in the dust and by the lake where some people are fishing. The whole of Mark's Gospel is about paradox: this juxtaposition of the wondrous power and presence of the living God, soujourning out on the beaches and byways with simple working folks.

So, Jesus just tells these fellows to follow him and they do. That's pretty amazing too when you think about it. If somebody walked onto your jobsite or into your home tomorrow afternoon and said, "Follow me," they would at least have to make you a fat written offer before you'd go. OK for some of us, it wouldn't have to be a very fat offer, but still. This story is a historically unique occurrence; the only way to understand it is to hold the grandeur and the mundanity of it together – at once -- in our consciousness. That's the identity of Christ.

When Jesus says "Follow me," he means that the people should go and do as he does. If there is relevance to us in these stories, it is a spiritual, attitudinal, vocational relevance, because Jesus is no longer around to physically follow. Jesus of course knows this – he exists from the ages of ages; he knows pretty much everything. Jesus is nowhere to be seen and everywhere to be followed. Our whole attitude and outlook on life has to change.

This idea is what Paul's remarks are good for. "Behave as if you have no spouses, no possessions, no emotions, etc., because the time is fulfilled." The image is both compelling and provoking, like so much of Paul's rhetoric. Moments of Aha! alternate maddeningly with moments of No Way! Paul reminds us that fulfilment comes at a price. As the great preacher says, "It's free but it ain't cheap." And of course Jesus will give us the definitive example of paying the price. For us the price is to adopt no less an attitude than this: Whatever we have, whatever we love, whatever we are is nothing until we know that it is all both from and for God.

This is what the psalmist means: "For God alone my soul in silence

waits." Nothing else will provide peace, fulfilment and a happy death. Not just fill-ment, but full-fulfillment. Filled full to overflowing, our cups runneth over. And what is the meaning of our payment, our sacrifice, if you will? Not so much a debt or obligation, as a balance to strike, a tit for tat, a Christly karma, a resolution and attempt -- to the best of our ability -- to satisfy God's plan: God has fulfilled us, and we are to fulfill God.

Paul was wrong about the end. 2000 years later we can safely argue that imminent is a vague term. But with the coming into the world of Jesus, the end is indeed ordained and fulfilled. The opportunity is here with us for an end to our old enslavement to wrong actions born of fear, and their dire consequences to ourselves and all creation. We have been given a new beginning, a new potential for life, a life wherein we are perfectly free to be the kind of people we want to be; to do right things and let go of their results; to make bi-partisan agreements even in times of challenge and controversy; to take care of the fish and of each other.

### **Hymn 537 Christ for the world we sing**

Christ for the world we sing! The world to Christ we bring  
With loving zeal;  
The poor and them that mourn, the faint and overborne,  
Sin-sick and sorrow-worn, whom Christ doth heal.

Christ for the world we sing! The world to Christ we bring  
With fervent prayer;  
The wayward and the lost, by restless passions tossed,  
Redeemed at countless cost, from dark despair.

Christ for the world we sing! The world to Christ we bring  
With one accord;  
With us the work to share, with us reproach to dare,  
With us the cross to bear, for Christ our Lord.

Christ for the world we sing! The world to Christ we bring  
With joyful song;  
The newborn souls, whose days, reclaimed from error's ways,  
Inspired with hope and praise, to Christ belong.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o-olDrNQEs>

### **The Mystery**

I was not; now I am—a few days hence  
I shall not be; I fain would look before  
And after, but can neither do; some Power  
Or lack of power says “no” to all I would.  
I stand upon a wide and sunless plain,  
Nor chart nor steel to guide my steps aright.  
Whene'er, o'ercoming fear, I dare to move,  
I grope without direction and by chance.  
Some feign to hear a voice and feel a hand  
That draws them ever upward thro' the gloom.  
But I—I hear no voice and touch no hand,  
Tho' oft thro' silence infinite I list,  
And strain my hearing to supernal sounds;  
Tho' oft thro' fateful darkness do I reach,  
And stretch my hand to find that other hand.  
I question of th' eternal bending skies  
That seem to neighbor with the novice earth;  
But they roll on, and daily shut their eyes  
On me, as I one day shall do on them,  
And tell me not the secret that I ask.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

