

The Sunday Missive – January 28, 2024 The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Hymn 493 O for a thousand tongues to sing

O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!

Jesus! the Name that charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.

Glory to God and praise and love be now and ever given
By saints below and saints above, the Church in earth and heaven.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2dYT_An16E

The Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses said: The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

Psalm 111

Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart* ***In the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.***

Great are the deeds of the Lord* ***They are studied by all who delight in them.***

God's work is full of majesty and splendor* ***Whose righteousness endures for ever.***

Whose marvellous works are to be remembered* ***The Lord is gracious and full of compassion.***

The works of God's hands are faithfulness and justice* ***All the commandments of the Lord are sure.***

They stand fast for ever and ever* ***Because they are spoken in truth and equity.***

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* ***Those who listen have a good understanding, and so they sing God's praises forever.***

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your

family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Hymn 763 As we gather at your table

As we gather at your Table, as we listen to your Word,
Help us know, O God, your presence;
Let our hearts and minds be stirred.
Nourish us with sacred story till we claim it as our own;
Teach us through this holy banquet how to make Love's vict'ry known.

Turn our worship into witness in the sacrament of life;
Send us forth to love and serve you,
Bringing peace where there is strife.
Give us, Christ, your great compassion to forgive as you forgave;
May we still behold your image in the world you died to save.

Gracious Spirit, help us summon other guests to share that Feast
Where triumphant Love will welcome
Those who had been last and least.
There no more will envy blind us nor will pride our peace destroy,
As we join with saints and angels to repeat the sounding joy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFz6Cw3RnWs>

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

God's Business Plan -- Epiphany 4B

As Charles Dickens wrote, the wisdom of the ancestors is in the simile. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus feeds us God's wisdom in similes, in hopes that we will 'Shema, Israel,' 'Hear, Israel.' And not just hear, hear and heed. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... The Kingdom of God is like a vineyard owner, who... Again and again, Jesus gives us these extended similes that we know as parables, in an effort to fill our hearts with the transforming energy of God's wisdom. For we are an argumentative and forgetful and argumentative species, a stiff-necked people!

In today's readings we have heard, not only similes, but direct wisdom from a number of our spiritual ancestors, wisdom that we would do well to hear and heed, wisdom that we argue with and forget at our peril. Moses, the Psalmist and Paul all give us clear, direct parameters for well-lived lives, painting the alternatives to their wisdom as indeed perilous, not to say disastrous for ourselves and those we influence.

Their wisdom has little to do with what we know as religion and everything to do with our relationship to the cosmic higher power we call God. The radical core of that relationship, according to Moses is a matter of hearing and heeding prophets, who themselves are held to exacting standards. To follow the Psalmist, we must continually study God, praise God and glorify God, enough to quieten those insistent voices that want to convince us of our own greatness. And if we are listening to Paul, we must accept that the most knowledgeable among us are in the most danger of undermining God's kingdom.

The trappings and powers and structures of religion are important, but only as far as they align with God's Word as spake by the prophets; they are not the foundation of God's relationship with humankind. That foundation is surely the Word itself: spoken, interpreted, debated, agreed upon. None of these words of wisdom we heard today were delivered by people claiming to be part of any established institutional religion. Moses and the people he led were hoping for the promised land, but it was still a long way off. The Psalmist is thought to have been writing when Israel was in exile, far from any Hebrew temple. Paul wrote and preached to a neonatal church, fragile in the extreme and frequently in danger from the same powers that had propelled Jesus to Calvary. Today we are on the extreme other end, historically, of the Church's great influence. There is no longer an overwhelming societal expectation of piety. The Church does not control what goes on among governments. We are fragmented by both outright

disputes and also denominational differences. And God has been exiled from the hearts and minds of many, many people. Empathy, curiosity and humility no longer seem to be desired by those who compete for positions of leadership.

None of this loss has any effect on the Word of God, as spoken by the prophets and as we are meant to hear and act upon in the world. None of these developments has anything to do with the Word of God made flesh in Jesus. None of this can separate us from the love of God in Christ if we accept and embrace it. None of this can stop us from being the body of a living Christ at work in the world and proving ourselves to be both from and for God through acts of justice and mercy and humility. The wisdom of the ancestors will help us keep our eyes on the task at hand, if we can only hear and heed.

Like everybody, I had two grandfathers. Like the luckiest among you, I got to know both of mine pretty well. They were both wise men, business and civic leaders, who rose from modest beginnings. From one, I got my first two names. He was a storyteller and builder; he constructed the first home he and my grandmother shared, by hand, out of rocks. His motto: “No deal is a good deal unless it’s good for both parties” sounds like the Golden Rule, St. Louis style.

The other grandfather gave me my last name. He became a business and government executive, an honest politician and statesman, a head of companies and departments. He ran things. One of his favorite pieces of advice about working in groups was to always ask the questions: “Who do I report to? What do I do? Who reports to me?” That would be Mosaic Law, American style.

We have to accept and embrace the awareness that answers to these three questions will enable success, not just in business and bureaucracy, but also in a godly life for ourselves and for the Church. At least that is what Moses and the Psalmist and Paul are trying to tell us. We, like the prophets report only to God. The prophets are to tell the truth and we are to listen to what they say and do what they say. But who reports to us? None other than God’s very self – accountable until the ages of ages – who will bestow grace and peace upon those people who believe.

“But, but, but,” we argue – “we want credit!” Listen to the Psalmist: Fear God. (Fear is a little misleading here, ‘revere’ might be a better word. In the modern sense, what we are to fear is not so much God as God-lessness.) So

we are bidden to get wise, revere God and give God all the credit, because that's who we report to. What we're to do is sing praise in the assembly of the faithful, glorify, fulfill. Simple. But 'who reports to us,' we demand? Are not the covenants of God the promises of God, the presence of Jesus report enough for us? "Keep singing until it is enough for you," says the Psalmist; keep praying for the desire to to surrender until that desire is ours.

And Saint Paul, what is his business formula for a life in Christ? The Corinthians are so smart and educated and sophisticated, that they have talked themselves right past the first question: To whom do we report? Well, "God, of course," say the ancestors. But these Corinthians are reporting to themselves and each other instead, ignoring the effects of their behavior on those who would be led by them. Paul insists that the industry God demands is mutual care. If instead we count on writing our own ticket, based on our own knowledge and desires alone, we are no longer reporting to God and will inevitably neglect the neighbors we are bidden to serve. What we're to do is care for one another. We report to God by caring for one another, and God reports to us through others' care for us. That's the business plan.

Jesus was human, and yet God worked holy miracles of healing through him. Once and for all, through Jesus, God gave us the formula for our own lives. We are no longer to wait for anointed prophets. Each of us has the power of prophecy. Each of us has the power of healing, if only we can feel Christ's love flowing through us, and perceive God's embrace within and beyond those whom we serve. Like a fire hydrant: the water comes from the river, flows through us, and when we open up, everyone on the block gets to play in it.

Here is Martin Luther's expression of the paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

Says Moses: "The ones who speak falsely in the name of other gods, and the ones who speak ungodly words in YHWH's name, they will all surely die."
"The ones who speak falsely (and they're hard to spot) in the name of other gods, and the ones who speak ungodly words in YHWH's name (they're even harder to spot), they will all surely die."

But we believe the ones who speak in the name of Christ --with authority! -- and by them, ohhh the demons that will be cast out and flee, shouting, "What have you to do with us, you holy ones of God?!?!" And then they will

be silent. The wisdom of the ancestors is indeed in the similes. So let us go forth and make like the Kingdom of God.

Hymn 569 God the omnipotent

God the Omnipotent! King, who ordainest
Thunder thy clarion, the lightning thy sword;
Show forth thy pity on high where thou reignest:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the All-merciful! Earth hath forsaken
Thy ways all holy, and slighted thy word;
Bid not thy wrath in its terrors awaken:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God, the all-righteous One! Earth hath defied thee;
Yet to eternity standeth thy word,
Falsehood and wrong shall not tarry beside thee:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the All-provident! earth by thy chastening
Yet shall to freedom and truth be restored;
Through the thick darkness thy kingdom is hastening:
Thou wilt give peace in our time, O Lord.

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

My Doubt

I wake, doubt, beside you,
like a curtain half-open.

I dress doubting,
like a cup
undecided if it has been dropped.

I eat doubting,
work doubting,
go out to a dubious cafe with skeptical friends.

I go to sleep doubting myself,
as a herd of goats
sleep in a suddenly gone-quiet truck.

I dream you, doubt,
nightly—
for what is the meaning of dreaming
if not that all we are while inside it
is transient, amorphous, in question?

Left hand and right hand,
doubt, you are in me,
throwing a basketball, guiding my knife and my fork.
Left knee and right knee,
we run for a bus,
for a meeting that surely will end before we arrive.

I would like
to grow content in you, doubt,
as a double-hung window
settles obedient into its hidden pulleys and ropes.

I doubt I can do so:
your own counterweight governs my nights and my days.

As the knob of hung lead holds steady
the open mouth of a window,
you hold me,
my kneeling before you resistant, stubborn,
offering these furious praises
I can't help but doubt you will ever be able to hear.

Jane Hirshfield