

Feb. 7, 2010
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. Canon Marianne Borg

I want to put the Gospel story that we just heard, in a context today. Immediately before this story that we just heard, Jesus has made it clear to the disciples that, his mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God...and what it would be like to live as a human being...to live in the world...in the reality of God's dream for us. And Jesus proclaims, "My work is to proclaim and to embody the Kingdom of God."

And right before that passage, there were several stories of healings that Jesus witnessed and even helped to facilitate. A woman with a fever, someone who was possessed by things that were binding him. Then the part about "I've come here to proclaim the Kingdom of God." Then the story that we hear today, and following this story...more stories of Jesus' healing. Healing people who are paralyzed...people who feel stained and unaccepted in society...lepers, for instance.

So I suggest that the story that we just heard, in the context of the other stories around it, that this story is also a healing story. And I would like to approach the Gospel story, by bringing our attention back to the Collect that we heard, and to this very provocative sentence from the prophet Isaiah. Because it's through the Collect, and through these words of the prophet Isaiah, that I started to think a little differently about the story in Luke,

First of all, the Collect. "Set us free, Oh God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life, which you have made known to us, in Jesus Christ." Let me remind us also, that we are still in the season of Epiphany, when we are looking for revelation, insight, and understanding of how Jesus manifests the presence of God in himself...and how also we are called to do the same. "Set us free, Oh God, from the bondage of our sins." I'd like to suggest this morning, that perhaps the bondage of our sins, is a mistaken notion that some of us have about sin...that we are born by nature, sort of unclean and flawed. I know in some Catechisms--not in the Episcopal church--the children are by nature sinful and unclean. This I suggest is not even a Biblical notion. For in the beginning, when God created...God created all that is...and it was good...and when we came along, it was very good. So I suggest that our deepest nature, that the very stuff of ourselves, is good. It's very good. And as Anglicans, one of the central points of our whole theology is that God is incarnate...comes in the flesh. And this is a very good thing, and that we come to know God in the flesh.

I suggest that the bondage of our sin, might be that we are in bondage, to forgetting...that we really are by nature--good. And beautifully and wonderfully made. And that we have forgotten that, and that that makes us subject to a kind of bondage, or oppression, or lack of self-understanding or peaceableness, that afflicts all of us. And that if we could only be released from that bondage--of that notion of sin--that we would then come into a new kind of liberty. And emotional freedom. And that we would know more about what abundance there is in life. An abundance which has been made known to us in Jesus. So the collect today: "Set us free, Oh God, from the bondage of our sins.

Set us free from our forgetfulness.” That we have forgotten that we are beautifully and wonderfully made. And give us the liberty of that abundant life. Set us free, so we can experience life in a fuller way.

So now for the provocative comment in Isaiah... And by the way, this is my reflection on it--not so much necessarily the whole context with which Isaiah is speaking. But I want to play a little bit with simply the words that are addressed to us.

“Go and say to this people: (who)
‘Keep listening but do not comprehend:
keep looking, but do not understand:
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
(or) listen with their ears,
(or) comprehend with their minds,
and turn, and be healed.”

It's kind of curious. We keep listening, but do not comprehend...keep looking but do not understand...that make the mind of this people dull. Stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, or listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds...but turn, and be healed. What this made me think about...is how much emphasis we have in our modern life, on the mind--or the head--as our primary way of knowing. That what we see with our eyes, or hear with our ears, or try to comprehend with our heads...with our thinking. How much emphasis there is on that, and perhaps that can only take us so far. It's not that it's not important. I'm anything but anti-intellectual. I married an intellectual (laughter). I love the intellectual! So I'm not making an anti-intellectual statement. But I'm suggesting that even in this text that says there are some things that we cannot comprehend with our minds, or our seeing in a certain way, or our hearing in a certain way. So be it. Let that be dulled. And maybe then, the people will turn and be healed.

What this made me think about is that...yes, the mind is important. But there are other ways of perceiving, and knowing. There are many ways of knowing. And one way is through the heart. And in the Hebrew tradition, the heart was considered the organ of perception, if you will, par excellence. The self at its deepest level, was known to be located in the heart. And it was through the heart, that one could see, and know, and even hear.

Also in the Hebrew tradition...there was a kind of knowing that happened even below the heart...in the gut. There was a kind of knowing that you first sensed deep in your gut. There are descriptions of Jesus, where it says, “He was moved with compassion.” He felt at a deep level, something is not right. I sense the struggle of my people. I sense the injustice. I can feel it in my body. And in the Greek, the translation for “He was moved with compassion,” that word for “moved” actually comes: “He was moved in his bowels.” He was moved deep inside, by what he was perceiving...and it moved him to compassion...to an action...to a response.

Now he may have also understood this in his head. But the way that stories are told is that “He was moved with compassion.” And some of us are moved by our heart. Some of us come to know things through our mind. But perhaps some of us--myself included--have lost sight of the other ways of knowing, and learning how to trust the other language of our beingness. The language--if you will--of the heart. Or the language of the gut. That there are other ways of knowing, and perceiving, that can be trusted. But our primary fluency is in the brain, and in the head. And maybe the time has come in these days...in our days, to understand more fully what it means to find other ways of knowing, and perceiving. Like ways through the heart, or through the gut.

And for this, I want to share with you a story, that I know that most of you have heard before. I have told it myself. It's a great story, and I think that great stories are worth telling more than once. I'm quite sure that Jesus told his stories more than once. So I want to share this story with you, because I think it points to this notion of how we might forget...the whole of who we are. And it's the story of the little four-year-old girl, who gets a new baby brother, and he's about five days old, and she goes to her parents, and she says, “I want to go in and have some one-on-one time with my new baby brother.” And the parents are a bit skeptical. They're wondering if sibling rivalry is already at work, and what does this exactly mean. But she insists, “I just want to go in by myself, and be with him.” So the parents agree, and she goes into the room. And they have one of those devices where you can hear what's going on in the room. And they crank up the volume, so they can hear everything. They hear her little feet, patter over to the crib, and the creaking sound of the crib...sounds like she's getting near the crib, and they hear her saying to her little brother -- fresh out of the womb, six days ago...”Tell me about God...I've almost forgotten.” “Tell me about God...I've almost forgotten.”

And I suggest that for some of us, maybe we've almost forgotten...about the full nature of God, in our world...and even God in us. And that if we've forgotten some things about God, we've maybe forgotten some things about ourselves. “Tell me about God...I've almost forgotten.” But we haven't forgotten so much, that we don't, on some level, know what we are seeking. For instance, homesickness...how many of us know a little bit about what it means to be homesick? Even if we were brought up in homes that really weren't very happy at all. But on some other level, we know what it means to be welcomed...and valued, at home. We want that. So maybe there's something about the fullness of our being: head...heart...gut...all of us, that we're already forgetting the value of it. The preciousness of it. The wonder of it. The information it has for us. But we haven't completely forgotten. Because...knitted right into our very being, is a sense of our wholeness. And that there is more to us than our heads. And so today, we're invited to bring all of ourselves...our whole body...into the presence of Jesus. Even those parts of us that have betrayed us. To bring your whole self...and to remember about God...and about you.

And now to our Gospel. So, in our Gospel story...the disciples are doing the dailiness of their work. They're fishermen...and they're doing what they're doing...the same kind of stuff they've been doing all the time. But they're coming up empty. They've been fishing, but they have nothing to show for themselves. Whatever they've been doing...it isn't working for them today. It isn't working for them right now. They're frus-

trated, and they don't know what to do. And Jesus speaks to them, and I suggest gives us an antidote, to our forgetfulness about why isn't this working? Jesus says to them, "Put out into the deep water, and let your nets down." Put out into the deep, and let down your nets. Put out into the deep, and let down, and don't be afraid. Jesus teaches us, from that place today, he calls us to the very place that he knows we have almost forgotten. That there is something deeper, at work, that we need to access...and pull up, if you will. There is a deeper place where we are called to go...and let down in that place...and see what comes up to the surface, and manifests--like an Epiphany. And we will be surprised by what comes forth, and even surprised by the abundance.

So maybe today, this is an invitation...to go out...put out into the deep. You know what that means for you. To go out into the deep. It's off from your safe shore. No terra firma today. But it's not too far out. And granted, you can't see a path on the water...if you use this imagery of him teaching you from the boat. But we are called to come to the place where he is. And he knows...and he stands in the place that he knows that you've almost forgotten. And calls us to come, put out into the deep, and let down. And don't be afraid. And see what comes and manifests. So perhaps today, as we're coming to the end of this season of Epiphany, and we're seeking more ways of apprehending the presence of Jesus. And how can we know about Jesus? How can we know about ourselves, and our humanity. Perhaps today, part of the encouragement is...your head is great, and how you see and think and know...but there are limits. Go to different places in yourself: your heart, your gut...and Jesus, who embodies this way, and knows this truth, and knows this life...he can teach us. So you have heard his voice today. Put out into the deep and let down. You have heard his voice. And today we are encouraged to respond to it, and know that there is something more beneath the surface...waiting to be called up in us.

By the way, next week we will be encouraged to enter a cloud of knowing...or not knowing...new knowing. It's a height metaphor. Today, we're called into the depths, to come into the deep, and know that there is more there to be disclosed for you, that can also set you free. And bring you into abundance. An abundant life. So you've heard the voice of Jesus. I encourage you to respond. Let him call you out. And something in us will be changed. And you will know it in your very being. Something will turn. And you will experience healing. And then you will find yourself following him... How can you not?