

A sermon preached on 5 Epiphany, February 4, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton
Isaiah 40:21-31. Psalm 147:1-12, 21c. 1 Corinthians 9:16-23. Mark 1:29-39

I'm always curious to see what Scriptures are assigned for the Sunday of Annual Meeting and what God might want to say to a congregation through those Scriptures.

Jesus caught my attention in today's Gospel. He was in Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee, where he first called his disciples to follow him. This was a comfortable home town visit for him and his disciples. After worshipping in the synagogue, they ate supper at Peter's Mother in law's house. After sundown, the whole community swarmed around that house, bringing family and friends who were sick and possessed by demons and Jesus healed many of them. You'd think that with this positive reception, and all the healings, Jesus would be focused on staying there to continue this successful ministry.

Yet, Jesus got up before sunrise and went alone to a deserted place to pray. He knew that he needed to keep checking in with his Heavenly Father for fresh guidance. He came to do God's will, which was often not what people expected or wanted.

During this time of prayer, Jesus discerned a clear call to leave his successful ministry in Capernaum and go to neighboring towns, so that "I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." This must have been frustrating for his disciples and their families. They had to leave the comforts of home again if they wanted to keep following Jesus.

This gospel challenges us personally and as a parish. Most of us and most parishes want to continue what we are comfortable with in our congregations. But what if God's Spirit wants to lead us in a different direction? Do we dare to take quality time to pray, like Jesus did, asking if God has any fresh guidance for us that might be different from our current expectations and desires?

Last year at our Annual Meeting we talked about the acute clergy shortage and the increasing number of congregations in Connecticut, across this country and around the world without clergy to lead them. We've also discovered that there is a significant shortage of organists. Yet, as we look back over the past year, we can see, and perhaps even be in awe of the many ways God has blessed and sustained us as a congregation. We have much for which we can thank God.

And here we are at another Annual Meeting without a regular priest or organist. Probably most of us want God to make things the way they were in the past, with at least a regular part-time priest and organist.

Yet, through today's Gospel, we are invited to wonder and ask, what fresh guidance might God give us as a congregation? Would God say, good job, people of Trinity. Just continue as you are. I am with you and will continue to bless and guide you.

Or, might Jesus say, this year, you need to be open to the possibility that I might lead you to different ways of worship and learning, different ways of outreach and service to the community, different models of leadership in partnership with other congregations in the area. What if Jesus wants to lead us to explore more Interfaith relationships, or invite a few groups who want to have a positive impact in the community, to use the unused space of our building?

I don't know what Jesus might say to us. Yet, given today's gospel, Jesus might invite us not to expect things to stay the same, but to prayerfully listen and discern together what fresh guidance God's Spirit might give us to be a new kind of faithful church here in Wethersfield at this time.

As we explore what changes Christ might invite us to make, it is important that we also stay grounded in the core of what it means to be a community of God's people. Through the centuries, Jews and Christians have gone through seasons of spiritual and numerical growth, stagnation, decline, and renewal. In every season, God's call has been to return to the basics, to seeking and following God's guidance with the long view in mind, not just the moment. Today's Scriptures help us sketch an outline of the basic core that has sustained Christian communities through the ups and downs of history. The way we live them might change, but not the focus.

Healthy Christian communities are engaged with 3 journeys. 1) A **journey inward** to know and love God and ourselves. 2) A **journey outward** to know, love and serve our neighbors, 3) A **journey in community** to inspire, guide and sustain us on our inward/outward journeys.

First, we are called to an **inward journey** to know and love God and ourselves more deeply. All of us know something about God, otherwise we would not be here. But are we growing and deepening in our interactive relationship of loving responsiveness with God?

In today's first reading, Isaiah asked the Hebrew people twice, "Have you not known? Have you not heard ...about the greatness of God?" Apparently, the people practiced the external rituals of religion but in their daily lives, they did not factor in the reality that God knows and cares about their struggles and is much greater and more powerful than all the political, military, religious and economic rulers that seem to control of their world. Isaiah invites them to pause in their anxious, fearful lives and be aware of the greatness of God. This awareness requires a different kind of prayer than we usually practice. We often pray our thanks, and we often pray for help. And we often neglect prayers of adoration, when we stop to savor, to be in awe and wonder at the cosmic greatness and loving nearness of God? Isaiah talks about God "who sits above the circle of the earth, who brings princes to naught and makes rulers of the earth as nothing". He says, "lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created the sun, moon and stars? "

Today's Psalm continues this theme, "God counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; there is no limit to his wisdom." When we focus on the greatness, the beauty, the power, the complexity of God's vast creation, we are lifted out of our narrow, limited perspective on life into the glory, the awesome, cosmic, creative, greatness of God.

Our prayer book weaves prayers of adoration into our worship? We pray the Gloria, the Psalms and the Sanctus in every Eucharist and we pray the Psalms and Canticles in Morning Prayer because these are all prayers of adoration. When we allow our little minds to be stretched by recognizing the awesome greatness and nearness of this loving God, who is greater than all human powers and authorities, then we are freed to let go of our fears and anxieties and remember again that we can trust this great God to guide us through everything, even the worst situations of our lives.

This inward prayer journey expands our awareness of God and also expands awareness of ourselves. Throughout my life and now that I am an aging elder, I keep learning that much of who I am keeps changing. Self-awareness is a never-ending journey. We can never know ourselves by simply looking in a mirror, because there is no "me" or "you" apart from God. Our creator is woven into our DNA, since God created us and dwells within us at the cellular level, at the level of our breathing. Isaiah said, God "sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers." We and all living

creatures are important, yet tiny parts of God's vast creation. We find our identity and purpose in relationship with God and our neighbors.

This leads to the 2nd journey, a **journey outward**. Christian communities are called to know, love and care for our neighbors. In today's gospel, Jesus cared for the neighbors who gathered around the house where he was staying by healing the sick and those possessed by demons. It may sound strange to talk about demons in our modern society, but perhaps, when the Bible speaks of being possessed, it means people who are controlled by something outside themselves. We might translate that to mean people who are addicted, controlled or possessed by other substances or influences like alcohol or drugs, addicted to screens, addicted to gambling or porn or work or anger or purchasing more than we need. We are a society of addicts. All of us are seduced and driven by messages which try to control us through inner and outer screens. Like Jesus, we are called help each other break free from addictions by 1) recognizing them and 2) admitting our powerlessness to overcome them by will power alone, 3) by turning our lives over to God who can empower us to choose, moment by moment, to let God guide our lives.

In today's epistle reading, Paul talks about his obligation to share the love of God with all his neighbors through his words and actions. God created all of us to lovingly care for our neighbors, including those we don't like who are rich or poor or in the middle, and from different races, religions, and nations. God calls every Christian community to support each other in our journey outside ourselves to share the healing love of God with our neighbors.

And 3rd, we are called to a **journey in community** with other Jesus followers. We live in a "Do-It-Yourself" nation of individualists. Many say they have a private connection with God and that is all they need. Many have been deeply hurt in religious communities, so they avoid them. And the observation of ancient Christian spiritual guides is: "The person who tries to be his or her own spiritual director has a fool for a spiritual director." It is always easier to see the flaws of others than to recognize our own flaws. Since we are all easily distracted, controlled, and blinded by our addictions, God uses our involvement in a community to help us keep recognizing and recovering from our addictions, distractions and blind spots, and to help us keep love of God and neighbor at the center of our lives. Weekly worship in community, regular conversations and learning groups and shared mission projects can help us keep returning to our journey of interactive loving relationships with God and our neighbors in need.

Even Jesus needed his very imperfect community of disciples to pray with him and help him keep following Divine guidance amid the constant challenges of his life. Like the disciples, no congregation or group is ever perfect. None of us are always loving. We all have weaknesses and flaws. Yet God can use the touch points, the wounds in our relationships to help us go deeper in our understanding and love of God, others and ourselves. We are all works in progress. God uses our imperfections as invitations to keep learning and trusting, not in the perfection of any person or community, but in God, who dwells in and can work through the imperfections of our community and of our personal lives.

Let's close our eyes for a few moments: Jesus left the crowds and went away early in the morning to pray, to orient his life toward listening to and following God's fresh guidance for his life. What fresh guidance might Jesus want to give us as a congregation at this time?...

How might Christ be inviting us to:

- 1) deepen our **inward journey** to know and love God and ourselves...,
- 2) to deepen our **outward journey** to know, love and serve our neighbors...
- 3) to deepen our **journey into community** to support us in living our inward/outward journey...

Day by day, dear Lord, three things we pray: to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.