



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 4, 2024

ISAIAH 40:21-31; PSALM 147:1-12, 21; 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-23; MARK 1:29-39

RHYTHMS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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.]*

Did you know that the Episcopal Church has monks and nun?!

I remember fondly when Kathy and I were first married, in school and dirt poor, the convent in Sewanee—the Sisters of St. Mary—were so gracious in their hospitality to us, serving homemade breakfast and greeting us as special guests. We have always

stay with them when we return to the mountain, and we find their rhythms of worship, work and prayer to offer a refreshing beauty.

I know others here make retreats at Holy Cross Monastery in New York, or with the brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Massachusetts.

Did you know the psalm translation we are using (at 9am and 11am today) comes from the Order of St. Helena, a group of Episcopal women living in community in Augusta, Georgia?

Altogether there are 18 monastic orders in the Episcopal Church, and 14 more communities who live in the world but commit to following a spiritual guideline that shapes their life. Some in this cathedral community are members of the latter, and our spiritual life is the richer for it.

Last April, I was in Memphis, Tennessee, for a gathering of clergy colleagues, and we made pilgrimage one day to St. Mary's Cathedral, a couple of miles inland from the Mississippi River, where Episcopal nuns arrived after the Civil War to establish a girls' school and orphanage. But in 1878, as a viral pandemic broke out in the city, forcing many to flee and killing nearly a third of the residents who remained, the sisters turned their attention to caring for the ill. It was Yellow Fever, a viral illness spread by mosquitoes, although they did not know that at the time.

Sisters Constance, Thecla, Francis, and Ruth, were among those who remained in the city to care for others, but they succumbed also, and they are known as the "martyrs of Memphis." We shared Eucharist around an altar that is given in their memory, and their

spirit and witness to Christ is very much alive in that place 150 years on.

Most of us will never turn to cloistered life as monastics, and I hope none will be martyred for your faith, but I belabor the stories a bit because the rhythms of daily life offer us a path to the deeper spiritual journey, and I want to explore that in the context of this day, when we gather for the Annual Parish Meeting.

Much has been written about how the Church has undergone a significant renewal, a seismic shift in identity and practice, every five hundred years or so. Rehearsed briefly, these include:

- the origins of monasticism that took root about 500CE which sustained the Church during the Dark Ages.
- The 11th Century Schism between eastern and western traditions that continues to shape all parts of the global church even today.
- The Protestant Reformations 500 years later paved the way for you and me to be sitting here today.

(If you want to read more about these, I'd recommend *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, by the late Phyllis Tickle, another woman from Memphis, and one of the great ecclesiologists of our time).

Let me just say these 500-year shifts are not inconsequential developments, and all indications are that we are in just such a period of transformation in this time. It will take decades to fully understand it, but I am convinced that the current state of human society with its chaotic degradations, its violent turns, and its anxious uncertainties is providing the Church an opportunity to be more relevant than ever. How we react and respond will cast light downrange on how history will remember this era and the Church's role in it. I would even go so far to say that how we respond will help determine how many lives will be lost (or saved) along the way.

The Church was made for times such as this, and I am reminded that Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby made the renewal of prayer his top priority. He points to the rhythms of monasticism as key to the enterprise of relevance and religious meaning. Again, we need not remove ourselves from the world to embrace this truth.

Today's gospel reveals the same pattern: simply put, Jesus worships God in community (his being a synagogue), then enters the world to serve (in his case, healing people), and then he slips off to pray. Notice

that it says, "in the morning, while it was still very dark, he went out to pray."

In the morning, while it was still very dark...

Mark's gospel never takes time to offer such overlays of descriptors unless there is a nuance to be made, which I think in this case, is to say that Jesus leans into the new day with prayerful hope that God is up to something in the moment, but it is still dark, which I take to mean, all is not well yet. Much remains unclear.

And there is the message for us in our time: we lean into the hope of a new day, when God's reign of justice and peace will prevail, but it is still dark, it is not yet resolved. And prayer is the catalyzing gift that helps us hold such a paradox.

We worship together, then go into the world to serve in God's name, and we make time for prayer. It is a trinitarian way of life open to all.

Jesus shows us the way; the monastics of our tradition model it for us and invite us into this way of life. This is the seed of transformation that, with God's help, will become the great emergence, a Church for the 21st Century, relevant and purposeful in a broken hurting world. I want this cathedral to be part of that. I want you and me to be part of that.

Here's an exciting new way we are seeking to live into this rhythm at Saint Mark's. We seek to use the cathedral asset of Leffler House as a base community, a gathering place for intentional community, guided by the rhythms of communal worship, spiritual formation, prayer, retreat and renewal, and service in the world. A tried-and-true pattern of life to which we are all invited in this time.

The working name for this endeavor is the Center for Spirituality and Action. We will share more in the coming weeks and months, including ways to engage and participate, but if you want to help cast the vision for this, let me know. I would love to have others bring

their wisdom and commitment to such an effort.

Above all, I encourage you to take stock of your life, and see where these rhythms of communal worship, actionable service, and intentional prayer fit into your daily existence. I don't know how to do this—this Christian way of life—without such grounding patterns.

And I believe this Cathedral community is well-situated to be part of that great emergence, if we will trust that God is stirring among us, a new day, even while it is still very dark.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!