

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – January 31, 2010

**Sermon for the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland –
The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector**

A few years ago when we were doing the Education for Ministry (EFM) program here one of the interesting questions we often talked about in our study groups was why we don't continue to add books to the Bible as Christian history continues to evolve. The collection of books that make up the Bible – what we call the “canon” of the Bible – was pretty much settled on by the middle of the third century. The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, of course, had been in existence long before that. By about the third century CE the church had decided which of the many early Christian writings would make up the New Testament. We have not, of course, added books since that time.

But, God continues speaking to and through us in new ways in every generation. We continue to interpret the Scripture in light of new circumstances and God continues to reveal new things to us. This work of interpretation and God's continuing gift of revelation in the context of God's faithful community of people can be authoritative for our lives just as the Scripture continues to be. The church, the Body of Christ, is the vehicle through which this interpretation and revelation happens. Often, though, the point at which established scripture and new interpretation and revelation meet can be disrupting –disturbing and disorienting of “the way things have always been” – even as we know that history is the chronicle of our human experiences at precisely those kinds of meeting points throughout time.

This is exactly what is going on in the Gospel this morning and, in fact, in each of today's readings. We need to recall what happened in the Gospel passage we read last week, which immediately precedes this week's. Last week Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The passage he read was the seminal one from Isaiah about calling God's prophet to proclaim good news at the margins of society:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

“to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Everyone was amazed at Jesus' reading of this passage, and, as we picked up the story at the beginning of today's passage, Jesus said to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” What Jesus was doing by reading this passage and saying that – “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” – was reinterpreting the passage, giving it new meaning in light of a new situation, even as God was revealing a

new relevance of this ancient text for people's lives in the first century. God was unfolding a new story, so to speak, right in front of the people in their own time and place. This is what Jesus makes clear when he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The gospel is making a powerful point here that in one way is deeply comforting to our lives, as it was to the people Jesus read to in his hometown synagogue: that God is present in every part of each of our lives, even the most seemingly insignificant, ordinary moments, the least notable and most underappreciated things; God is present in the particularities of each of our lives just as God is present with the least noticed, most easily forgotten people in society – the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed. But, as powerfully comforting as this message is, its flip side is equally, and potentially deeply, disturbing. That God is everywhere present to everyone also means that God is doing new things and bringing new revelations in new and strange places through new and different people who are outside the mainstream. God is unfolding God's new story not only, and not necessarily, in the established community or in the places in our personal lives where we feel most secure, but in the midst of outsiders and on the margins of society and the edges of our personal lives where we are least secure and most vulnerable to ways and meanings of life that are different from those we have always known.

Jesus knows how disturbing, how undermining, the underside of the message is, and this is what Luke is exploring in the gospel. Jesus says that his people are not necessarily going to like this message when they start to realize what it means. "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," he says. Then he proceeds to remind them of some of the famous outsiders of the Hebrew Scriptures through whom God revealed new things in times past, but in doing so upset the expectations of established people. The stories of God sending Elijah to a widow at Zarephath and of God healing Naaman the Syrian through Elisha both proclaim God's powerful presence, but in new and unfamiliar ways through the lives of outsiders. In a dry, famine-plagued land where there were many widows, God chose one, a nonbeliever, through whom to make known God's compassionate presence and power. God not only provided food to outsiders in that story, but also heals the widow's son, as a result of which she exclaims joy as new believer. Similarly, Naaman, commander of a Syrian army – a potential threat – heard of Elisha through an Israelite woman he captured to be a wife. Naaman was a leper, and he wanted to be healed. He went to Elisha, bathed the way he was told, and upon finding that he was healed of the leprosy believed in God. – Powerful stories of God's healing, restorative presence in human lives, but stories also of God doing new things through unexpected persons, outsiders. Comforting stories on the one hand, but disturbing and disorienting on the other for many who would have preferred to hear such told about people in their own familiar circles, their own families and friends.

Here now was Jesus proclaiming another new story, God's continuing revelation – powerful in its message, but threatening in its implication. "Good news to the poor,

release for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and a permanent year of jubilee” – this was all about outsiders. What was in it for the insiders; what did it mean for us, people started asking; where did God’s new story leave those of us who have been around a long time? Suddenly the good news was not the story the people of Nazareth were expecting or wanted to hear. Their annoying God was at it again, calling them to change, to grow, to expand their visions of grace and mission, and move beyond their own worlds. They didn’t like this part of the new revelation. “When they heard it, all in the synagogue were filled with rage,” the gospel says. “They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off.” But, God wasn’t through with Jesus, and he continued on his way. – And, God isn’t through with us either.

God is continually birthing new stories, new revelations, and prompting new interpretations and understandings of God’s mission in the world in and through God’s faithful people, and in and through outsiders. This is precisely the church’s challenge today, and we are intimately part of it. The risen God we proclaim does not stay quietly settled in the well-worn stories of either our personal lives or our life together as the church. In disheveled lands, thirsty and famished people, widows and widowers, orphans, and homeless children, – or, closer to home, even in new-comers and newer-comers to our churches – no less than in desperate widows and disbelieving commanders of ancient times God is unfolding new stories for the church to hear, join, and proclaim as the story of God’s presence, manifest in outsiders, with a new urgency for God’s mission in the world.

A case in point as an example of the paradox the gospel is exploring is the church that Paul helped establish at Corinth just a few years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. We hear Paul’s words from the 13th chapter of First Corinthians recited so often at weddings that we forget why Paul wrote them; it was for anything but a wedding. It was for a church fight. They were written to call an inwardly obsessed church stuck in contention among its members over its internal affairs out of that small world and into the work of doing God’s mission in the world – into the larger view of all that the church was here on earth to accomplish, namely the Kingdom of God’s justice and hope – calling the church to hear and respond to the new story God was unfolding in their midst just a few years after the earthly life of Jesus. “Love never ends,” Paul wrote. God doesn’t stop revealing; God doesn’t stop calling; and God can’t afford for you to stop doing ministry, because you – and only you – are now Christ for your world. It was the same message as Jeremiah’s to God’s people in his time. “Before you were born,” God said to Jeremiah, “I called you.” Just because I am doing a new thing with others now I can’t have you turn away as I send you to do my work among them.

The readings this morning are great lessons for the church today and for each of us personally, reminding us that God is still speaking, and telling us not to be afraid of what that may mean but to get even more deeply involved with God. In fact, God invites our participation in framing God’s new story for this generation. To embrace the

good news and do the work that it takes to speak it without fear for what it may require of you is to know the fullness of God's love and the power of God's grace in our time.