

Spiritual Alchemy

Epiphany4B, Collect, Deut 18:15-20, Psa 111, Mark 1:21-28

Grace Church Newton

January 28, 2024

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Each week I have a loose process that helps me arrive here, ready on a Sunday morning, to share some word from our lectionary each week. It starts on a Monday morning on the sofa in my study at home – usually with a lit candle, a set of four readings and a prayer – that week’s collect. Though the lectionary changes, one thing remains the same from week to week: when I first sit down on a Monday morning, I never know where I will end up by the following Sunday. It’s a mystery. An alchemy of the texts and prayers that are independently appointed for that week; where I am in my life – and so therefore, what I might most notice; where I think *we* are as a congregation and as a broader community; my historical / literary / critical sense of the scripture that we’ve been handed that week; and my fervent – sometimes uncertain prayer – that the Spirit of God might mysteriously work through all of that to give birth to a message that’s relevant to us, here, now.

This morning, I’d like to walk us through part of this week’s process. Here I am, on my sofa Monday morning. “Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things in heaven and on earth. Hear our prayers, and *in our time grant us your peace.*” Hmm, I thought. Let’s underline peace, because that’s a theme I can work with. We could really use some reassurance these days. We’re in a presidential election year with critical consequences and predictable accompanying craziness. There’s a war in Europe. There’s a war in the Middle East. The need is great. I can work with “peace.” Okay.

Continuing with my weekly process, let’s see what’s next. On to Deuteronomy. The people ask God to send prophets who will hear God’s message and share it with them because “If [they] hear the voice of the Lord...any more, [they] will die.” Well that’s not very peaceful! That doesn’t sound like the “merciful” God we were just praying to in the collect. So we have peace intersecting with, what? The awesomeness of God? The inscrutability of God? The *danger* of God?

Peace | Danger, Risk.

So I move on to the Psalm. “God is gracious and full of compassion,” I read. Then a few verses later I read that if I want to grow into wisdom, then I need to *fear* God.

Peace | Danger
Compassion | Fear

And then I arrive at today’s gospel. Now, remember, we’re still in chapter one of the gospel of Mark, a lot has happened and things are moving very fast. In just 20 verses, John the Baptist appears proclaiming a baptism of repentance, Jesus approaches John and is baptized himself and the voice of God comes from heaven. At this point Jesus is driven into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. When Jesus returns he speaks his first recorded words, according to Mark; his first sermon, if you will: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Then Jesus recruits his first four followers: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. And then we arrive at the gospel I sat down to on Monday morning. Jesus enters the synagogue and encounters a man with an unclean spirit, which challenges him: “what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?...I know who you are” the spirit says. And when Jesus commands the spirit to leave the man, it cries out with a loud voice and convulses the man. So now, on Monday morning on my sofa, I see Jesus’ *love* and *care* for the people around him – curing the man of a condition that would have isolated him from other people, enabling this man to rejoin his community. *And*, I see a wildness. A fierceness. Love and care | Wildness.

So here we are, at the end of Monday morning’s reflection:

Peace | Danger
Compassion | Fear
Love and care | Wildness

What a juxtaposition! Thankfully, at this point there are still five days for this mysterious, alchemical, spirit-led reflection to unveil what our message might be. And I needed that time. If you remember the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned that one of the pieces of my weekly alchemy is that I bring to the lectionary – as we all do – *where I’m coming from*. I am more drawn to peace, compassion, love and care as descriptors of God’s nature. But the Biblical record is clear: danger, risk, fear, wildness...that’s God, too.

Sometimes I think we may try to tame God. I think I do. But the Divine, the Holy, the Sacred is so far beyond our ability to grasp. We can never know the fullness of God. We try, and that’s a good thing – to try to understand the nature of God. I think it’s called practicing theology! But if we’re not careful, in our effort to wrap words around God, we may end up

impoverishing our understanding of God. It helps us feel more secure. More in control. Less uncertain.

But the peace of God, God's love and compassion exist side by side with danger, and risk, and wildness. In uncertain times – in times of great change – we try to contain our uncertainty. And in so doing we may miss the fullness of God and of each other.

These past few years have provided researchers with a natural experiment: people's response to the living through pandemic. Studies have found that those who were "intolerant of uncertainty" [[Source](#)], who were more likely to see uncertainty as a threat, had worse mental health outcomes. Whereas those who had a greater tolerance for uncertainty were better able to adapt to the rapidly-changing circumstances.

The authors of this recently released report concluded: "at the start of a new year rife with high-stakes unknowns, we should rethink our outdated notions of not knowing as weakness, and instead discover this mindset as a strength" [ibid.]. Instead of needing to *know* outcomes, to *control* outcomes, can we embrace a way of *not knowing* as – we might say – a spiritual practice?

To be able to trust that God is, in all God's fullness? Because we need *all* of God. We need to be *open* to all of God. We need to know that danger and risk and fear and wildness and so many other words we use to try to draw our minds and hearts near to God – we need to know that our uncertain, unpredictable, untamable God works through us. That the Kingdom of Heaven has indeed drawn near...if we dare open ourselves to it...if we risk embracing *not knowing*. If we untame God.

Today, following worship, the 168th Annual Meeting of Grace Church will take place. Each year we take this moment to pause and look forward to the year ahead. If there is anything *certain* about the coming year, it's that we live in *uncertain* times, times of rapid change. This year, may each of us open ourselves to our own mysterious, alchemical, spirit-led reflection. May we practice this in our own hearts and in community. This year may our God of peace and compassion and love and care AND danger and risk and fear and wildness and so much more be present among us and lead us into *God's* future.

Amen.