



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

PSALM 111

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

MARK 1:21-28

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

JANUARY 31, 2021

I know who you are, the Holy One of God. As Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath in Capernaum, someone believed to be demon-possessed shouts out the truth about Jesus. Demon possession was believed to be the cause of mental illness, so in the gospel worldview it is an “unclean spirit” who recognizes Jesus and is afraid of his Divine power. But the unclean spirit also speaks truth: *you are the Holy one of God.* The truth can come from anywhere and anyone can speak it.

Jesus is not afraid of mental illness or difference of any kind, and he heals the man at that moment. Exorcism and healings in the gospels are always signs of the reign of God come near. Jesus faces realities of sickness and evil head on.

Today I invite us to consider: What is our relationship with truth? T.S. Eliot famously wrote: *Humankind cannot bear very much reality*¹. We may limit our daily news intake for that reason. Overload. Our relationship with the truth may be approach/avoid. How do we cope with painful truth? We might recall a certain former president sharing his strategy with Bob Woodward²: “Deny, deny, deny”. *The truth shall set you free*³, Jesus promises, but often there is an

¹ T.S. Eliot: *Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/Cannot bear very much reality*: Burnt Norton: *Four Quartets*

² Bob Woodward: *Fear: Trump in the White House*

³ John 8:32

intense struggle with old worldviews we have to jettison to make room for new realities.

I overheard a person ahead of me in line at a deli recently. She was buying soda and a sandwich and the cashier asked her: How are you? *Oh*, she said, *I am exhausted, like everyone else*. The cashier looked at her sympathetically and nodded. The cashier must be exhausted too. This week I was talking with someone who lives uptown and attends a nearby parish. He said his fellow parishioners uptown on Sunday mornings look exhausted. I expect all of us feel our pandemic lives are much smaller, so limited, disconnected. The chaos of the former administration and the constant lies was exhausting. Now we face new scientific truth. Finally we have several vaccines, but we don't have nearly enough supply on line. Finally there is responsible federal organization, but there are mutant strains that are more contagious and possibly more deadly. We are told our best hope is to end-run and out-run mutations by vaccinations. Governor Cuomo said this week: if the current vaccines don't work on some of the mutations, the biotech companies have to go back to the drawing board and *that* is the nightmare

scenario. It is also the unvarnished truth. A priest friend in another Diocese said this week: *I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this.* I know many feel this way...parents with young children learning at home, even as they are working from home - if they are fortunate enough to still have paid employment. Every week is a struggle to put food on the table for millions. Worrying constantly about money is itself exhausting - as anyone who has ever lived with that reality can testify.

People of faith are sometimes accused of having a sketchy, avoidant relationship with the truth and with reality. I hope and believe the opposite is true. I hope that we have the courage to walk towards the truth and face into it, as our Lord does. Jesus calls us to a *deeper* engagement with reality than the materialistic escapism of much of 21st century western culture. This is counter cultural. In our culture, we have been conditioned to *avoid* difficult truths as much as possible: sickness, ageing, death, destruction of the planet by our careless habits; looking away from our responsibility to help our neighbors; crossing the street to avoid an aggressive panhandler....you know

what I mean. Generally avoiding the truth of the suffering of others and our own. I recall well about a year ago my sadness that many of my mother's relatives did not visit her much as she was suffering from dementia and wheelchair bound the last six months of her life. They just couldn't cope with it, they said. But this is your aunt, this is your sister, I would think. Truth can be too painful to bear and even good people avoid it. It is understandable, it is human.

Times like these test us mind, body and soul. There is no shame in feeling depleted and overwhelmed. How could we not? We are asked to embrace all kinds of truth head on: political truth about injustice and underserved communities of color, truth about climate change, truth about disease. It is a lot. Yet Jesus asks us to be a person who comes alongside suffering, to help and heal however we can, as Jesus does. Jesus asks us to go where he goes, however we can. We care because this world is where God is at work; this is the world God is redeeming; this is the world where God walked on a Sabbath morning in Capernaum. God shows up in this world through us,

through people who are walk towards the truth, and who care.

The good news is that our faith offers us more than facing the truth with gritted teeth. Our faith is always renewing us from within and giving us strength to face reality, to carry on each day. Right now we are in the valley of the shadow of death; we cannot go around it so we have to go through it. But we are not going to be in this valley forever and as we emerge, we will have learned new things. We are having to go deeper in our spiritual lives. That will bear fruit in due season. I hope we will never again take any of the blessings of this life for granted. I hope we can deepen our gratitude; deepen our participation in the gift of democracy; deepen our appreciation of the gift of this church, the gift of our connectedness to God and each other. I hope all our churches will reconvene with renewed faith and joy.

Let us look to Jesus as we face the hard truths of these days. Let us ask Jesus to fill our hearts and minds with his love for us, and fill us with the perseverance that he alone can give. Let us be people that others

can count on to be steadfast, loyal and courageous. Mark tells us today that evil and sickness do not ultimately prevail. Health and wholeness, freedom and life spring up wherever Jesus walks. We are ambassadors of that great Truth.

AMEN

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