

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B cycle, Feb 1, 2015

First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20 (*I will raise up a prophet like Moses and put my words into his mouth*)

Responsorial Psalm 95: "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts."

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 (*I should like you to be free of anxiety*)

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28 (*Jesus taught them as one having authority*)

♪ Be not afraid, I go before you always.

Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.

If you pass through raging waters in the sea, you shall not drown.

If you walk amid the burning flames, you shall not be harmed.

If you stand before the power of hell and death is at your side,

Know that I am with you through it all. ♪

I sang that song some years ago on the last night of a Mission Sr. Anna and I led at a parish near Pass Christian, Mississippi. The whole area had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and we could see in the people's faces that they related to the words of the prophet Isaiah, "*if you pass through raging waters in the sea, you shall not drown.*"

The parish had three worship sites - in Mississippi they call them "Church houses." As we looked out at the people, we saw a mix of black and white faces, and many shades in between. White and black Catholics had only begun to worship in one "church house" in the early 1970's, after the building where the white Catholics worshiped was completely destroyed by hurricane Camille, in 1969. It was the most truly integrated parish we had ever seen.

I sang those words again in 2011 after Hurricane Irene had swept through Middleburgh and Schoharie - washing away many homes, and sweeping through the doublewide mobile home which was my residence and the ministry center for Bethany Ministries - destroying most of what was in the house.

After the initial shock, I remembered that God has spoken to us through Moses and Paul, and through his Son, Jesus: "*Be not afraid, I know what you need. I have been with you in the past and will continue to love you and guide you.*"

Jesus treated each person as sacred. He healed them by forgiving their sins and, in today's Gospel, by casting out the evil that held them prisoner. Our world may think that demons are a thing of the past, but the lesson is still important today.

Jesus loves us enough to say, "*You are more than what you do or what you look like. You are more than any wrong you do, or any evil that is in you. I will separate you from that evil, I will cast that evil out of you, so you can see how sacred you are, and how much I care for your life.*" And he loves us not only as individuals, but as a people, as families and communities as well. Maybe the unclean spirits of our day simply have different names: like violence, racism, greed, fear, resentment, addiction, arrogance and control. These things can still take on a life of their own, and Jesus can still name them and cast them out.

Walter Brueggeman, in an article from Sojourners, names three demons in our own day, attitudes which can lead to choices which are at the root of oppression & poverty all over the world. I believe that these are the attitudes and choices which have led to the pain that erupts in violence in so many places in the world, and in our own cities. The Gospel has something to say to our cultural assumptions, to our attitudes as Americans, and to our pain as a community, as well as to our individual personal lives.

The 1st "demon" is **autonomy** - the illusion that I have to make it on my own and can do whatever I want in order to make it, regardless of who it hurts.

The 2nd is **anxiety**, a consequence of depending only on myself as an individual.

The 3rd is **Greed**, rooted in a drive to overcome anxiety and to achieve an impossible state of *control* over others and the environment.

Jesus can cast out those unclean spirits today through the *Good News* he lived and preached, *Good News* which has roots in Moses and the other prophets of his own tradition. He can make us whole through his Spirit which makes him present today.

In place of autonomy, Jesus offers a **covenant** relationship - with God and one another. Another word for that is a caring community.

I was set free from my illusion of autonomy pretty completely after the flood in 2011. The people of the area asked us to stay because they knew that we shared their experience. Someone let me stay in their summer home for a year and others helped me move into a new apartment in Feb, 2014 - after 2 ½ years of moving from one place to another.

I certainly had no illusions of autonomy, but I had a real experience of the caring community that supported us, and I am full of joy that Sr. Anna and I continue to both receive and give as a part of that community.

In place of the demons of anxiety and fear, the fear that has been described as "*trusting only in my own power*," Jesus offers a vision of the **abundance** of God's love and gifts. God's creation provides enough to feed and support everyone in the world, but we are still learning how to share it and distribute it.

The people of Pass Christian saw God's vision fulfilled in 1969 when the "church house" where the white Catholics worshiped was leveled and the Parish where the black Catholics prayed invited their white brothers & sisters to worship with them. A few years later, they decided not to rebuild the building that had been destroyed. That choice endures to this day - as a new church building now houses three communities.

In place of the 3rd demon, greed, with its cousin, **control**, Jesus offers **generosity**, an attitude we saw in the people of the Schoharie valley and in coastal Mississippi. We can tell story after story of people generously taking care of each other.

After the flood in 2011 in Schoharie County, the only place in the Middleburgh area to gather for a meal was the local Catholic Church Hall. The people of that parish called themselves, "Our Lady of the Valley Café" & served lunch every day for 3 months. Afterwards, the people missed eating together so much that the 4 Christian churches in Middleburgh have been hosting a free community dinner every Wednesday for 3 years. They call it Neighbors Eating Together, or NET.

The Lord has set me free from a lot of my own *anxiety* over not having *control* by showing me how to live more completely in the *Now*. Since 2011, whenever someone asks me the simple question, "How are you?" I respond, "Today, I'm great!" Often there is a smile, and another question, "Today?" implying "what happened & what about tomorrow?" Then I answer something like, "*Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is God's problem; all I have it today.*" I continually let go of my regret over the past and my anxiety over the future by doing what I can in the now."

If we are to join Jesus in casting out the demons of *self-centered* individualism, exhausting anxiety and unbridled greed for control, we need to look first at ourselves and ask Jesus to expose those things in us and cast them out. Then we need to trust in the Lord rather than our own power, so he can set us free.

Paul writes in the second reading, "I should like you to be free of anxieties." We need to get past the distraction of our pain and our past so we can work for the common good of the community. It is possible. There are stories in the Scripture about the first community of Christians, who were subject to economic persecution and even martyrdom. The stories of the good that happened after disasters like those caused by hurricanes Camille, Katrina, Irene & Sandy give us hope that it can still happen. And it does still happen!

I once read a Time Magazine essay by Nancy Gibbs. She wrote, *"Maybe as times get worse, we get better. Our pain makes us feel other people's too. Our fear lets us practice valor; we are tense, and tender as well. And among the things we can no longer afford are things we never really wanted anyway, like the solitude of snobbery, and the luxury of denial."*

I pray we can more deeply trust the words of the prophets and the power of Jesus, our Lord.

I pray we can believe and live the words of Isaiah set to music:

♪ You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst.
You shall wander far in safety, though you do not know the way.
You shall speak your words in foreign lands and all will understand.
You shall see the face of God and live."

Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest. ♪