

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 30-31, 2021:

Readings: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; 1 Corinthians 7: 32-35; Mark 1: 21-28

Preacher: Nancy DeRycke

As Chaplain at a local nursing home, I often marvel at people's insights. I was leading a floor service recently and was interrupted by Joel, a resident and a self-proclaimed agnostic. He told of his boarding an airplane on a gloomy rainy day. On takeoff, it rose through the clouds to more dark rainclouds. He settled in, but eventually, after ascending even higher, the plane suddenly broke through more clouds into bright sunshine everywhere! Joel told of being so moved by the awe he felt in experiencing the light after dark and gloom. Just as there was sun even when no one could see it, he knew there must be "something/Someone" more than he can "see" spiritually too. From then on, he has called himself a "hopeful agnostic."

We've all experienced our share of gloomy doom this past year with two pandemics (health and politics); we can get stuck, feeling anxious, out of control or hope.

Our readings today may be like boarding that plane. Moses, discouraged with slowness of faith, says God will "raise up a prophet like me from your midst" and you'd better pay attention to that prophet. Is God breaking through, raising up something prophetic from deep within you these days? Is it time to take a breath and go deep inside our heart and find a way through the chaos—not just for ourselves, but for others around us?

In our second reading, Paul addresses the anxiety of men and women no matter what way of life they are in. If we are honest, the anxiety inside us can sometimes paralyze or almost destroy hope. *Or* we can look for or believe that light will somehow break through. We are still in the throes of a new year beginning—with vaccines to alleviate our fears, with hopes for a less chaotic political environment, and so much more. We'd love to see our world and each other instantly become "free of anxieties" which was Paul's desire. But we are realistic enough to know that it will take a lot of hope, prayer, hard work to at least reign in those anxieties and fears.

Then our Gospel brings the unexpected: Jesus, of course working on the Sabbath again (!), calling unclean spirits or demons out of a person. It doesn't take a lot to realize the need to deal with demons that have been plaguing us and the world—so many that it's impossible to name them all. And some demons are more subtle than others.

Sabbath or not, there is no appropriate or easy time to call out the demons. But we have to bite the bullet (interesting term!) and pray—really pray—to discern what can be done to quiet our own spirit, letting God's Spirit break through.

Is there an “unclean spirit” within or around you that, with help from God and maybe someone else, too, you can command to depart or lessen its hold? Perhaps it's changing our language (I just “hate” ...; I could “kill” for...) or undoing a personal prejudice (“I just don't trust those people”), or listening more openly to differing points of view and giving up our self-righteousness, or standing up to an injustice, or remaining positive when conversation turns to doom (“our country is doomed” or “woe is me”). It may be time to deal with an anxiety that has dampened our courage and determination.

I dare say, you and I are the prophets God is raising up in the midst of the gloom, to let hope break through and in some way to make a difference in our world. We can't do everything, but we can do something.

What unnecessary anxiety will we alleviate?

What unclean spirit will we begin to escort out of our hearts and lives today?

You and I are to be prophets of hope that God's light will break through the clouds of our times. We'd better take a deep breath and pay attention....