

Healing Touch, January 5, 2020, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Ps 103:1-5; Mark 1.21-45

Prayer

You may have noticed something a little bit different about the service today—or maybe you didn't.

Every Sunday we have scripture readings as an essential part of our service. If you visit other churches you may have noticed that they seem to be using the same readings that we are. I'm not the one who decides which readings we're going to use every week. The readings are set, and many churches use them—and not just the Anglican churches either. Many churches follow the same set of readings throughout the year—the readings are put together in something called the "lectionary". The lectionary we have been following, alongside many other churches, is called, "The Revised Common Lectionary". We *were* following that lectionary, until today.

Today is the first Sunday of us using a different lectionary. There *are* other churches that use it as well, but not as many churches (though the number is growing). The most immediate differences that you will notice with this new lectionary ("The Narrative Lectionary") is that there is only one primary reading each week (although we will also be doing a second "supplementary" reading each week) and that the readings seem to be connected from week-to-week. If you are someone who attends church most weeks, then you will find that the readings (and the sermons) seem to follow a sequence. One week will pick up where the last week left off.

This *narrative* format changes the way we think about our holy scriptures. Instead of a reading that is recited each week, we are going to be hearing stories, and these stories will be part of a larger whole from week to week.

Many of us grew up with stories—whether we heard bedtime stories read to us, or if we were avid readers, or if we had teachers reading to us at school—stories are an important part of our culture—and not just religious culture. For some of us, stories are still an important part of our everyday lives because we *still* read books or watch television or movies or even listen to podcasts or radio serials.

For people of faith, stories take on a special significance. The stories of our scriptures can be very instructive to our faith and to our being—though the stories we have in our bible are rarely simple. We don't have Aesop's fables in our bibles. Do you all know Aesop's fables? You probably all know the fable of the boy who cried wolf at least?

Aesop's fables are wonderful. They are short and to the point—and they are simple. Straightforward.

The stories of our scriptures are rarely so simple. And it is much easier to teach a simple story with a clear point than it is to try to explore *nuance*. That is especially difficult when you have only a very limited amount of time.

Show of hands: How many of you remember hearing about Noah's Ark in Sunday School as children? Is that a simple story, a cute story of God saving animals in a big boat? —but wait, God was saving the animals from...God's wrath? That means all the other animals (and people! Can't forget the people) all died at the hand of God? This is a kid's story?! Only Noah and his family (and the animals he brought on the ark) didn't die in the flood?

Okay, new show of hands. How many of you ever remember hearing the story of Noah's Ark preached about in church as an adult?

It is a difficult story to talk about—but it is also an important part of our scriptural heritage. That doesn't mean that it is simple or straightforward.

When I was growing up, I got to attend two churches many weeks: The Roman Catholic Church, nearby, and the Anglican Church, further away, where my entire family was welcome at communion. The Catholic service was quick but boring and unengaging. Children were to sit quietly (as the adults did), and listen. If children couldn't sit quietly there was a glassed-in "wailing room" with a speaker at the back so that you could see and hear most of what was going on—but you weren't really connected (and the closed room meant the other people wouldn't have to see or hear as much of the noisy child).

The Anglican service, by contrast, was boring and unengaging—and longer. More singing, however. But, in reality, I only know what that service was like because I assisted as an altar server at the Anglican church. If I hadn't been an altar server, I wouldn't even know what the majority of the service was like at all. I would have been in Sunday School for nearly the entire service. The weeks that I was in Sunday School instead of altar serving, church was a lot more fun.

The vast majority of the people my age and older who attended either the Anglican or Catholic church have stopped attending. I'm speaking to you all, who are the exception to the rule. Many of you know, however, that your own children or your friends have stopped attending church. Maybe because it's boring and unengaging.

But it seems to me that both approaches to children: option one: expect them to sit still and quiet or be removed; and option two: remove them from the service so they have no idea of what the worshipping community is doing—are doomed to failure. Actually, they have already been shown to be failures in the recent history of the church. Our numbers, nationally, are declining. Less people are going to church. The "glory days" that people remember with packed churches and enormous Sunday Schools have led to closing and merging churches today.

Here's the point that I'm trying to make: Children are spiritual beings. Children of almost any age can understand God and faith. Jesus himself said "let the little children come to me" and "unless you change and become like one of these children you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Good children's ministry engages with the spirituality of children—it meets their needs and recognizes that they are not the same as adults. Much of my own faith formation came largely before I was 13 years-old.

But even the best Sunday School in the world still fails to connect children with an active worshipping congregation when the children are removed from the worship service.

And what's more, *adults* could stand to be a little more engaged in our Sunday worship as well. Many of us adults have grown accustomed to just sitting still while the worship service happens around us. We don't interact with the message. We don't listen to the readings (not really, anyway). We don't follow the stories. (Some of us do, of course).

But how can we really expect *anybody* of any age to pay attention to and engage with three or four different readings every week? Especially if there's no context? If those readings are not connected to the weeks before or the weeks after?

In the months ahead, we are going to be exploring how to bring the best parts of Sunday School into church—and we are all going to get a sense of what it means to be worshipping as one community—to be growing in faith alongside people who are still quite literally growing.

And one of the ways we are going to be able to do that is by simplifying our readings each Sunday, even when the young people are participating in Sunday School downstairs.

This Sunday our “story” comes to us from the gospel of Mark.

We’re going to be hearing a lot from Mark’s gospel in the weeks ahead. All the way until Easter, actually. We will hear the whole story of Jesus, as told through Mark’s gospel, week by week. We won’t hear every word, but we’ll hear most of the gospel, and mostly in order too. It’s not a huge gospel. You could read the whole thing aloud in about twenty-five minutes if you were so inclined, but it tells a unique and simple version of the story of Jesus.

And even though the Christmas season is still fresh in many of our minds, Mark’s gospel skips the Nativity story altogether. We pick up the story 20 verses in, but already much has happened: We meet John the Baptist who baptises Jesus in the river Jordan as the voice of God calls out from the clouds and the spirit descends as a dove. Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days (though we don’t hear any of the details) and afterward is tended to by angels. John the Baptist is imprisoned and Jesus starts moving through Galilee preaching a message of repentance, saying that the kingdom of God has come near. He then calls his first disciples, Andrew and Peter, and James and John, all fishermen, and they leave their boats behind and follow him.

And then we have the story we heard this morning—Jesus the rockstar. From unknown beginnings (remember, in Mark’s gospel there is no nativity story), Jesus suddenly starts speaking in synagogues as one who has authority—and casts out demons who claim to know who he really is. He then moves around healing people and by the end of our passage, despite his efforts to keep his miracles under wraps, Jesus is so famous that it is hard for him to move around without attracting attention. That’s a pretty fast rise-to-fame in Mark’s gospel.

We’ve only just begun to look at Mark’s gospel and the story of Jesus it contains. We don’t have time to do it all today—we don’t even have time to look at all of what has happened in this reading! But we don’t have to. We have many more weeks of this same gospel to really get into the story of Jesus as told by Mark and look at some of the particularities.

But here is something remarkable about this story: the encounter with the Leper. The word “leprosy” really referred to many different types of skin diseases—real leprosy (what we call Hansen’s disease today) could lead to horrific injury and eventually death. It was not well-understood and people with leprosy were socially outcast. They were not permitted to socialize with other, to live near them, and had to beg for money and for food.

And yet, in this story, moved with compassion, Jesus *touches* the man who begs him for healing.

Yes, Jesus did restore him to health and he was able to be inspected by the priests and return to society—but before all that, Jesus *touched* him. He could have gotten the disease; he could have been ostracized himself—but Jesus was moved with compassion and touched him.

There are people who are ostracized today—not permitted to be a part of the rest of society. They have been ostracized by their circumstances, or their mental or physical health, or their past actions, or their behaviour or choices—or who they are. They have been cut off from others by the church, by their friends, by other members of society.

Maybe you have been the one who has been cut off.

How miraculous would it be for someone to receive that human touch—maybe it is an actual human touch, or maybe it is a phone call. An acknowledgement. Eye contact. Using a preferred name. A handshake or a hug. Even a friendly word.

Jesus did many miracles in that first chapter of Mark, but perhaps this, perhaps reaching out and touching someone who had been isolated from society—perhaps that was his best miracle.