

Sermon Epiphany 4 Year B, 2023 (All Saints'); Gospel Mark 1: 21-28

God Incarnate: Your Story

“God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, the Spirit: Open us to know your Presence in all things.”

Frederick Buechner was an American author, Presbyterian minister, preacher, and theologian. He was one of the greatest writers and storytellers of the 20th century. He died in August of 2022 at the age of 96. He wrote 39 published books and his works have been compared to C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. I have spoken about him from this pulpit before. His books and essays have impacted my own spiritual formation as much as any theologian. Cynthia and I decided to re-read his daily meditations titled Listening to Your Life and we now begin our day reading these meditations aloud to one another. That title “Listening to Your Life” reflects one of Buechner’s foundational beliefs, that being that God is incarnate, that God speaks to us in the everyday events of our lives. It is in those events, good and bad, that we can find God. In his use of the word “listening” Buechner does not mean simply listening in the auditory sense of hearing with our ears. Perhaps you have actually heard God speaking to you that way. I know a few people who have. But what Buechner means by “listening,” I think, is finding and knowing God by staying awake and paying attention to ordinary things: things like taking your children to school; kissing a loved one goodbye; eating lunch with a friend; hearing the rain patter against the window. As he puts it “there is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize or not recognize God in it, in the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness.” God is present in all things, including nature and in the people we encounter like those sitting in the pew next to you here today, but also including—perhaps especially so—in ourselves. To think that God is present in everything can be difficult, can it not? To think that God is present even within us. The word we use for this is “panentheism,” meaning God is present ‘in’ all

things. The pre-Christian Celts of what became Ireland and Scotland knew this —God in nature and in all created things—but once Christianity from mainland Europe arrived there in the 2nd century things began to change. For instance, what the Celts saw and knew as the light of God shining in the eyes of the newborn child—later called the “original blessing” —was replaced by the doctrine of “original sin,” promoted by Christian theologians like St. Augustine and made doctrine by the church, the doctrine that we are all born into sin, a distortion of the image of God. It is no wonder that we struggle to see ourselves as the original blessing of God. Yet, look into the eyes of that newborn baby and you will see it. What you see there is truly a miracle, one of the greatest miracles of all. Life itself as blessing.

There are so many things that keep us from seeing this Presence within ourselves, that keep us from as Buechner puts it recognizing God within the events of our lives, within others, within ourselves. There are so many things, as Mark calls them “demons” in the gospel that we read today, that keep us from knowing who we really are. Our demons that blind us to that truth, things like attachments, idols, pride, prejudice. We all have them. Things that happen that hurt us, like the death of someone we love; a disease that changes us into someone we never wanted or thought we would be; an addiction to some substance we crave even more than life itself; so many things we have to live through. Things that make us wonder whether or not there really is a God at all, much less a God of love. So many demons. Where is God in all of that? I think one way to interpret the gospel today is the role Jesus plays in helping to remove such demons. Jesus is just beginning his ministry. He is in Capernaum and has entered the synagogue. A man with an unclean spirit cries out “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy one of God.” Jesus responds “Be quiet and come out of him!” And whatever demons possessed that man, whatever it was that was keeping him from knowing who he truly was,

came out of him. He was restored to his true self, to that original blessing that he was from the very beginning. He found his way.

God incarnate. What exactly does that mean? It means that God is present within all of creation. The first incarnation happened in the very beginning, what we now think was almost 14 billion years ago, when God emptied God's self into creation. Everything we see and experience now is a manifestation or revelation—an epiphany—of God's presence, every galaxy, every star, every animal, every fish, every plant, every thing. Our home Earth itself is sacred because it is revelation of God. As Christians we call this Presence the Christ. The second incarnation happened just over 2000 years ago when God manifested God's self into humanity in the body of Jesus, Jesus the Christ, the revelation of God in personal form, as love. St. Paul says that we are the body of Christ, that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. This allows us to see God as the Christ in ourselves and in one another. I would expand that to say that we are capable of “being” Christ to others in the world, because we all have the Christ within us. We are incarnations of the Christ. We are created from one source, and we carry within us the light and love of God that has been there since the very beginning. How do we see that? How do we know that? As Buechner says we stay awake and pay attention to God's presence within the experiences of our lives. We look for God by listening to our lives.

Brother Lawrence was a 17th century Carmelite lay brother whose one desire was to know the constant companionship of God. He is known for a little book entitled The Practice of the Presence of God. His life attests that God is present in the most commonplace of circumstances of everyday life, even in the bad and painful things that happen. He was injured during the war, one leg crippled, and suffered with chronic pain. He entered the Carmelite order and his job there was to prepare food and to clean the monastery kitchen. He discovered that he was just as able to find God in the times he spent doing his menial tasks in the kitchen, things like cutting up vegetables, as he was during

his solitary and communal prayer. He created an inner space in which he was able to become more aware of God's presence. He prayed a lot, and by prayer I mean he looked for God's presence not so much with words but with awareness. The priest and theologian Henri Nouwen put it like this: "Praying is not only speaking to God, but it also involves listening to God, listening to the Christ who dwells in the very depths of your heart. God doesn't shout, doesn't thrust or force himself upon you. God's voice is a very unassuming voice, very nearly a whisper, the voice of gentle love. Whatever you do with your life, go on listening to God's voice in your heart. This listening must be an active and very attentive listening, for in our restless and noisy world God's loving voice is easily drowned out."

So, look at your life. Listen to what it has taught you and is telling you now. What is your story? Where has God been in it? In both the good times and the bad; the peace and goodness you have known, and in the suffering; the love you have felt and the absence of love. Where is God in it now? Your story is important. Who you are and who your mother and father were, the mistakes you have made together with the occasional discoveries, the bad times and good times, the moments of grace. God knows nothing is more important than that we look at it, keep track of it, these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way; because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, that God makes God's self known to each of us. Think about simple mundane events that have opened you up to that sense of Presence. Events that maybe surprised you, totally unexpected moments, when you saw at least in that moment the truth that at the heart of life there is goodness, even joy and peace; perhaps in the bleakest of that experience, that love was still there. Powerful! It is the love of God, for us as Christians it is the love of the Christ manifest in the life of Jesus, the love and the Christ alive within you now and from your beginning. A gift, the original blessing.

I believe that we can actually do something to open up to such moments. We can spend a few moments throughout our day simply becoming quiet, simply listening for whatever might be there to hear. Perhaps carving out a time for intentionally sitting quietly, without words, becoming aware that God is there. [The mantra I use now in such moments is from Psalm 46 verse 10: “Be still and know that I am...”] Whatever your concept of God is—and for each of us it might be different—sit still and listen. There are so many different ideas about what this God is, so many different religions each with their own ideas and interpretations. But at the foundation, when we filter through all of these ways people have of thinking about what God is, I believe that at the core, at the heart of them all, is love. It is in you. Listen for it. Listen to your life, your own story. You might just find it there.