

Sermon on Sunday 31 January 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Proverbs 3. 3-6, 21-24; Mark 1. 21-28

Making Hope

At exactly this time last week, huge flakes of snow were falling like a silent gift upon a tired world. The timing, in many ways, couldn't have been better. The days were dragging, morale was low; and then, magically, within minutes, the world felt different. Before long, the sound of laughter began to fill the air and a new lightness lifted the heaviness so many of us were feeling.

Later, our dog Misty would discover the joy of chasing (and eating) snowballs and the Stewart family would make an executive decision to designate that day our unofficial 'White Christmas'. We celebrated by switching on the Christmas lights and donning head-torches to go sledging after dark on Panshanger hill.

For many of us that blanket of snow, for a while at least, made the world feel new; feel hopeful.

I guess one of the hardest things about the times we're living through is that inability to forecast an end to this. We are in a state of limbo and fatigue. More than ever, we need hopeful, playful moments in our lives; horizons to look toward; little things to lift us.

I have to say, then, that my heart sank a bit when I first saw what this week's gospel reading was. An exorcism... really?? I always feel on shaky territory when I'm called to comment or preach on stories like this. For me, the jury's out when it comes to evil spirits. Without wanting to explain away the supernatural, it is clear, I think, that some of these stories can be attributed to a more primitive understanding of medical conditions, such as epilepsy or mental ill-health. And, so, perhaps actually this *is* a deliverance story for these times.

If we redefine 'evil spirit', for today at least, as whatever might be restricting our flourishing; whatever might be heavy or oppressive within our lives, then we are, I think, in need, more than ever, of deliverance.

There's no question that these times are a perfect storm for anxiety, depression, loneliness, grief. Personally, I find myself struggling a lot with lethargy, a lack of energy or enthusiasm for life. I also find I have interrupted sleep and unwelcome dreams. Like you; I miss things.

So, what might we learn from Jesus' approach to the 'spirits' that beset people in his day? Well, notice that he addressed the 'spirit' and not the person. We are not the 'spirits' that oppress us; in other words, we are not our feelings.

I'll say that again: We are not our feelings.

Humour me for a moment. Imagine that you are a mountain; rooted and established within the earth. Our feelings and emotions are not the mountain. They are simply the weather that surrounds the mountain.

And weather changes, but the mountain remains because the mountain is rooted to the earth.

In the same way, we are rooted within God, who, as Paul Tillich reminds us, is 'the ground of our being'. God is our foundation, our security. Emotions come and go; God remains steadfast; faithful.

If we learn to treat our negative emotions like weather, as something separate from us (easier said than done, I know), if we can learn to be dispassionate about those feelings, to look at them as something 'other', then we can more easily see them for what they are. We can speak to them, in fact, in the words Jesus used; 'be quiet'.

Before I say anything more, a couple of important footnotes here; one about depression and one about grief. It goes without saying, I hope, that depression should always be managed alongside medical and therapeutic help. Grief cannot, and should not, be by-passed; grief deserves and needs its own time to sit with and through that particular weather.

So, we are not our feelings.

This week I came across a blog where the author speaks candidly about living with insomnia. Over the years, she's tried different self-help techniques with little success. Recently, however, she discovered a book called 'The Surrender Experiment' by someone called Michael Singer, which encouraged her to, in her words, 'turn my nights over to the Divine'. And so now, every night, she repeats this prayer or mantra:

"I'm just leaving this with you. You can have this night. Use it in whatever way you want. It's yours to do with as you wish. However this night plays out, I will be OK.'

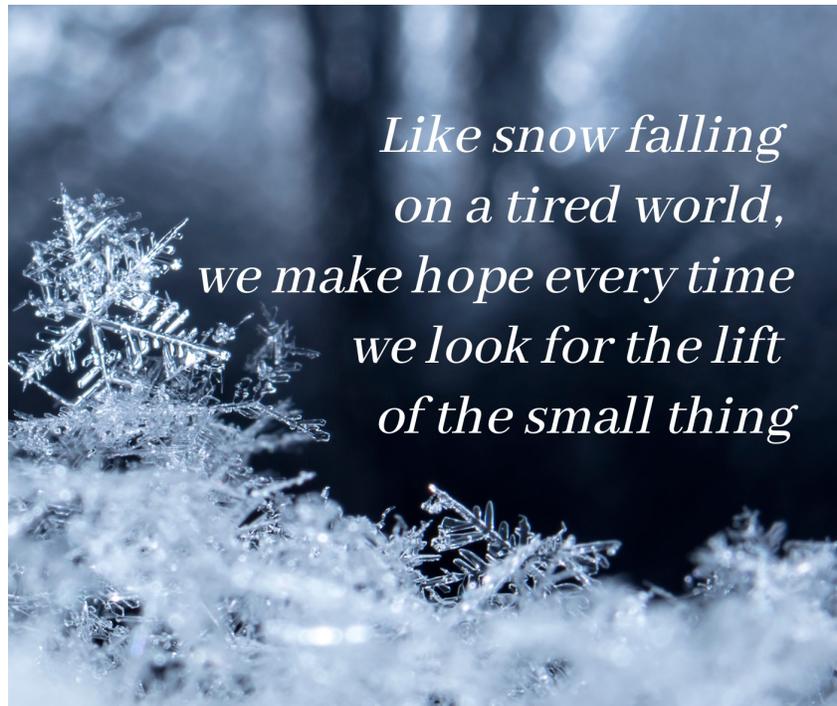
This prayer of surrender can, I think, be helpful in any situation that causes stress or anxiety. It is, in the words of the hymn we listened to as we were arriving, the same as praying 'let go my soul and trust in him. The waves and wind still know his name'.

Deliverance, for me, is not about God parachuting in to fix or change the weather around us. For me, it's at least two things. First, it's surrender; it's that letting go to God and letting be; trusting that he is earth beneath us, that the wind and waves and weather still know his name. And in that name, we can say 'be quiet'.

Secondly, for me, deliverance is about making hope. As Jan Richardson says in one of her blessings; 'Hope is not made of wishes but of substance'. Like snow falling on a tired world, we make hope every time we choose to look for the lift of the small thing; the snowdrop breaking through; signs of the promised Spring. We make hope by making our lives more playful, by giving ourselves little things to look forward to. We make hope by planning little acts of kindness for others.

Without wanting to embarrass her, my wife, Rachel, is just wonderful at this. Constantly she's planning little things for us as a family like arranging a wreath for our door in every season; like planning (immediately after this service, in fact), an American Diner 'at-home' brunch for our American-loving son; like sending vegan cupcakes to our daughter and her housemates. As churches, over the next weeks, some of you will make hope for our exhausted funeral directors by delivering home-made cakes. In God's economy, when we make hope for others, it travels back full circle to us.

So, in this state of limbo and fatigue in which we live, we surrender our need to be in control; we let it go into the safer-keeping of God. And we make hope by making 'Moments' (capital M) in our days and in the days of others. Amen



Mark 1. 21-28

New International Version

Jesus Drives Out an Impure Spirit

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other,

“What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” ²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Proverbs 3

³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.

⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;

⁶ in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight. ^[a]²¹ My child, do not let
wisdom and understanding out of your sight,
preserve sound judgment and discretion;

²² they will be life for you,
an ornament to grace your neck.

²³ Then you will go on your way in safety,
and your foot will not stumble.

²⁴ When you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.