

# **Sermons @ Trinity**

*December 7, 2008: 2 Advent, Year B*

**“Spirituality vs  
Fragmentation”**

*The Rev. R. Cameron Miller*

Good morning.

There is a misprint in the bulletin where it says that the excerpt from Rev. King's speech is from 1963...clearly it is from April 3, 1968 and it was the night before he was assassinated.

I prefer to call him *Reverend* King instead of Dr. King, because I believe his memory has been *domesticated* to make him less dangerous. One of the ways we have domesticated his memory is to *secularize* him when every fiber of his body, and every note of his speech was religious.

We have *secularized* him and made him digestible for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders who need to *finally* hear about an African American in United States history – as if there were not plenty of others. But we don't want to teach them about how radical he was in his denunciations of the Viet Nam War as a White Man's war against the Yellow Man. We don't want to teach them about how radical he was in his insistence that education be equal *and* unsegregated. We don't want to teach them about any of the numerous radical implications of his mid-1960's ideas applied to our segregationist economics of 2008.

So...we make him a *Doctor* King, and we neglect to inform those 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders that Rev. King was a prophet, like Isaiah was a prophet and like Jesus was a prophet; and that *prophets are prophets* precisely because they speak for God. How embarrassing would that be to tell 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders?

I want to read you the first four paragraphs of that speech because the whole speech never gets heard, and it makes clear that his speech was not a speech but a sermon.

These paragraphs also make clear the Isaiah-like poetic imagery that Rev. King employed, which had to be intentional on his part since he was a preacher and the son of a preacher after all. Here then, is how he began his mountain-top sermon that night:

*“As you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" — I would take my mental flight by Egypt*

*through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land.*

*And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there. I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality.*

*But I wouldn't stop there. I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments around there, through various emperors and leaders.*

*But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and esthetic life of (humankind).*

*But I wouldn't stop there. I would even go by the way that the man for whom I'm named had his habitat. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church in Wittenberg.*

*But I wouldn't stop there. I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.*

*But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with an eloquent cry that we have nothing to fear but fear itself.*

*But I wouldn't stop there. Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy."*

*Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars..."*

**Prophets. There may not be many of them by there are always a few around – and prophetic communities too.**

You know, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America the Christian churches were self-consciously *prophetic*. The Abolitionist movement to end slavery, and the Suffrage movement to grant women the vote, and anti-Child Labor movement to protect children...all were fiercely fought with significant support from pulpits and with the hands and feet and money of Christian communities.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Robber Barons like Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, made an effort to de-fang the major Protestant Denominations so that they would be less involved in public policy debates – especially economics and Labor reform.

They helped to fund religious-oriented efforts toward ending the plagues of alcoholism, pornography, sexual misconduct and other concerns of *private morality*. They surely did not intend or foresee that their efforts would eventually lead to Prohibition, but in re-directing religious passion for public justice toward an obsession with private morality, that was one of the consequences.

Another outcome of this effort was the *domestication* the Gospel through the false dichotomy of the sacred and profane, or the realm of the religious and the secular.

This dualism led to the idea that religion should not be political. But that is an obscene notion. The Gospel *is* political. To attempt to remove politics from religion is like removing fiber from your diet – the only thing left would be water and junk.

By politics I do not mean partisanship. The Gospel is silent when it comes to political parties. The Gospel is also silent when it comes to national interests – it is indifferent to any particular state or government. But that does not mean it is not deeply and thoroughly political. Take the opening sentence of the Gospel according to Mark we just heard this morning. It seems innocent enough, doesn't it? "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*"

You may have read or heard that opening line dozens or even scores of times if you have been a regular church-goer, especially in Advent. But I want us to hear that opening sentence with this background.

On January 1<sup>st</sup> in the year 42 of this Common Era – that would be one-thousand, nine-hundred and sixty-six years ago – the Roman Senate issued a decree and it began, “Good news!”

That phrase, “Good news” – whether a declaration from the Roman Senate or at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark 30 years later – is what we translate as the word “Gospel.” The Roman Senate’s *Good News* was that Julius Caesar had been declared “God” and thus, Gaius Octavius, Julius’ son, was the “*Son of God.*”

It is no accident that Mark, writing his Gospel in the bowels of Roman occupied territories, just after the Romans had destroyed the Jewish Temple and the Holy City of Jerusalem, begins *his* story of Jesus with the revolutionary line: “*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God.*”

The Roman Senate is not the author of the Good News, the followers of Jesus are. The Emperor is not god, the God of Abraham and Sarah, is God. Octavius is not the Son of God, the Christ is the son of God. Mark was being subversive, don’t you know?

Our core document, our theological constitution so-to-speak, is from the very first sentence, a *political* document.

Mark does not segregate the world into “religious” and “secular.” Rather, he believes the whole world, the whole cosmos, and even the most insignificant human being, *belongs to God.*

The realm of politics, the realm of economics, even the realm of science, is a category *within the realm of the spiritual* and not a realm unto themselves.

Dare I say it? Even business...even global markets and mega-corporations are but a category within the realm of the spiritual – they are *not* realms unto themselves even though that is what they proclaim.

At least that is the case the Gospel makes – you are free to believe it or not.

*The whole cosmos belongs to God* so all of life, including politics, is within the spiritual realm. Of course, you and I have been taught, have been nursed actually, on just the reverse notion: *the spiritual* is but one category of life alongside all the other categories of life, and these categories can all be segregated into compartments that neither know nor disturb one another.

That is how the atomic bomb was made – with the makers of each part compartmentalized so they wouldn't know or envision the end result. That is how Terrorist cells work, they compartmentalize small cells of agents who do not know each other or communicate with each other until the final act of terror, if even then. That is how an alcoholic or drug abuser keeps the abuse and the consequences of the abuse from being noticed. The abuser compartmentalizes his or her life so that work, family, and groups of friends can't compare notes and thus risk a confrontation that might endanger the abusers consumption habits.

But the Gospel makes the case for de-compartmentalization. There may be different *categories* of life but they are all connected and it is spirituality that weaves them together into a coherent and healing whole. In the *absence* of a strong spirituality that binds the categories of life together, what takes place is fragmentation.

Fragmentation, as with the financial fragmentation we have all recently witnessed and experienced, leads to chaos. And chaos usually allows the most vulnerable and marginalized to become the victim of the darkest of human exploits.

So the Advent question leading toward Christmas that I want to invite us to consider in the days ahead, has to do with *spiritual coherence* and our own sense of fragmentation. I would encourage us to take some time this week and think about the various categories of our own lives. Our time. Our money. Our work. Our family relationships. Our friendships. Our economic choices. Our political actions and choices. Our religious participation and worship. Our education and learning.

What connects them? How do we actively engage in connecting them? How do we place them, metaphorically, in the same room? As Obama keeps talking about a team of rivals, how do our competing categories

reach toward becoming a team instead of divergent and segregated compartments in competition with one another for the possession of our life?

Now there is a dandy Advent reflection!

There are a great many forces at work in our 21<sup>st</sup> century political and economic culture, that seek to keep us fragmented. When we are fragmented we are weak and susceptible. When there is a coherence and strong connectedness weaving together all the various categories of our life, rather than competing to pull us apart, we can sustain a centeredness and peace even in the midst of chaos.

So I invite you to engage in another week of Advent reflection – this time on the various categories of your life and what holds them together...and if perhaps you need more connectedness between them and a stronger bond. Then, make a plan and work it. Spirituality is very practical like that.

Finally, *listen* for the prophets. *Listen* for them, the ones past or the ones present. *Listen* for the prophets and you will know them when you hear them. They *name* the sources of fragmentation and they employ *hope* to pull us forward. They bring us moments of *clarity* and inspire our imagination to reach higher, longer, broader, and deeper.

As Christmas approaches, prepare yourself to hear the prophetic story of Christmas this year. Amen.