4th Sunday after the Epiphany January 28, 2018

Annual Meeting for All Saints Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm 111 Mark 1:21-28

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts

be acceptable in thy sight, our Lord and our Redeemer.

When my daughters were young, we read the seven books of Narnia written by C. S. Lewis.

My daughters loved being transported with Lucy, Peter, Susan and Edmond into the world of magic, mythical beasts and talking animals to be with the great lion, Aslan, the one who called the land of Narnia into being, the one who rescued it from endless winter, and the one who stands as its judge at the end of time.

We were reading the Christ story without knowing it. I had no idea until much later that the great lion, Aslan, was the Christ. All I knew, like my daughters, was that he was not a “tame lion.”

Aslan’s breath smells of summer and new-cut hay, but one puff can blow out the stars. Aslan’s paws are velvet, but his claws can rake like needles. Aslan can bear children on his back, but when roused to anger, he terrifies even those who love and trust him. Aslan can be merry and inspire delight, but he can also be grave and solemn with sorrow at evil, foolishness, hurt and harm. Aslan is bigger than life, larger than any idea of him, greater than any expectation. No one can control Aslan or take him for granted. Aslan is not a tame lion.

In the land of Narnia, evil was real, bad things happened to good people, and we all needed Aslan to save us, ***not only*** from menacing evil acts of cruelty, but ***from our own lack*** of courage, fortitude and trust. We loved Aslan. We needed Aslan. And we learned, he was willing to die for us, his love for us that great.

This morning we enter into the land of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, and here we meet Jesus who confronts the evil spirits and banishes them. Jesus is not a tame savior. Here, we are not in the world of make-believe, and yet Evil is just as Real. Jesus stands up to the unclean spirits, and they mock him by saying, “What have you to do with us, O Holy One of God; have you come to destroy us?” (Good luck with that, buddy).

Yet, that’s exactly what Jesus does, with authority and power, he silences them and throws them out, leaving everyone amazed in his wake, astonished at his power, and overwhelmed by his teaching. Jesus is not a tame savior.

Jesus is Love, which is stronger than evil. That’s what makes him the Christ.

Through this encounter in this first chapter, Mark is creating his gospel in miniature, sharing with us the through this short story, the gospel truth in the face of our day to day living. It goes like this:

First of all, Evil powers are real. They are just as real today as they were in Jesus’ day. Let’s name a few of them: violent acts of hate, seduction, betrayal, murder, rape, and starvation. These acts manifest themselves outwardly, some of them, if not most of them, are cruel beyond our imagination. This is just fact- it’s part of belonging to the human race.

Also, there are the subtler, inner manifestations of evil, as well, and just as real: feelings of alienation, meaninglessness and despair, fear of self, and the incapacity to suffer with others and identify with loss and pain. And then there are all those triggers which induce hypocrisy, addiction, power plays, hording, and shame. We are familiar with these demons- it’s part of being human.

Mark is clear: these inner and outer manifestations of evil destroy. They are real, and in their grasp, we can become like the living dead. If left to its own devices, every generation from the beginning of time is adrift from its center, As St. Paul reminds us, knowledge in the end, without love, only puffs up, and we are susceptible to our own weaknesses, fears and frailties, and pride, thinking that we are too strong to need saving.

No wonder there is terror on the parts of the evil spirits when confronted by a Love that knows no end, which is never tamed. This love reveals what is real and true and deep: we are in need of saving!

All is not lost. Into this world, Jesus comes to us, to touch us, to put his finger into our wounds. He comes to us, who, by the very fact of our living, are suffering. And Jesus, just like the great lion Aslan, takes on the battle against evil in our stead and wins…… never letting go, even to the point of dying for us, so we can live.

This is Mark’s gospel. The rest is commentary.

Jesus did not die because of his ***view of God***. Jesus was killed because of his ***view of us***.

Jesus was crucified for his capacity to love all, especially the outcast, the disenfranchised and the broken. He was killed because he believed we all belong to God. And all those parts of us, we are ashamed of and hide, Jesus desires. The judgment of Jesus is ***not*** about our unworthiness. It’s the exact opposite. Jesus is forever at our side because in his sights we are worthy; he loves us just as we are. Jesus will never let us go. He is with us for eternity. Our lives are holy.

And now with a love like this, we have something to live for. We have a new knowledge: there is no greater love than this- a willingness to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Evil spirits are banished from their control of us, and the Resurrected Spirit of Jesus’ Love is within us. And this love is greater than death.

We know this. The real power in the world which crosses generations and cultures is the healing power of love: look at the lives of Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Buddha, Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teresa of Avila, soldiers who die in the battlefield, first responders, a mother willing to share a kidney with her child, a child willing to stand up to a bully.

When we act in love, we are practicing resurrection. Suffering and evil and death never have the last word, even though they are as real as real can be. Your power to love transcends it all: to share, to renew, to examine, to explore, to be, to breathe, to fling doors open, to pitch a tent into another’s suffering, to make meaning, to give a hand, to risk, to trust, to find community, to challenge injustice, and to live in a land which believes in the gospel truth: we are here to practice resurrection, in small ways, big ways, simple ways, profound ways.

A former student wrote to me this week, asking me if I could help him create a community at MIT which could be like church without being called church.

“Tell me what you mean.”

“In the midst of the best science, the fastest technology, and the smartest ideas, I am dying, and so many of my friends…. we are dying, for a place, a community to “uncover” with no judgment or fear of how you will “appear.” I need a place that is grounded in compassion where it’s ok to share the hard things about life and still be accepted. I want to matter and not worry about ulterior motives or political theory or the efficiency of my productivity. I need to do some soul-work, I guess. I don’t know where to begin.”

What a cry from the wilderness. Jesus spoke to that cry; no wonder he had throngs following him. The church is one of the few outposts left in the world that can translate the unmasking of a knowledge that only puffs up into the unmasking of the untamed power of love that heals. We all are in need of being saved, for sure. And by being saved, we can practice resurrection.

Today we meet for our Annual Meeting to celebrate our ministries and our life of faith we hold with each other. One hundred years ago a wonderful community of Christians of All Saints set a cornerstone with us in mind. They never met us; would never know us, but they loved us deeply and extended their faith into our living.

We are doing the same. We are setting a new cornerstone for the next hundred years. We will never meet those parishioners, but we are loving them and extending our faith into their living. This is the ultimate outreach!

One hundred years from now, those parishioners will pray in thanksgiving for us because we believed in them.

And my student? He needs us, too, fellow-travelers of soul work. We are witnesses to the world that no matter how much evil swirls around us, we practice resurrection.

Never underestimate how much your hope in life matters! Our Savior is not tame, and neither are we! AMEN