

February 7, 2021 – The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-16
Matthew 11:1-6

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mt. 11:4-5)

Today I would like to pick up on the theme of seeking that I touched on two weeks ago, specifically a quote from Peter Matthiessen, who wrote what I regard as a Tibetan Buddhist classic: *The Snow Leopard*. The cover of my old paperback copy of the book says,

*Across the most awesome mountains on earth,
Peter Matthiessen went in
search of the rare snow leopard.
His dangerous
trip became a pilgrimage,
a luminous
journey of the heart.*

I confess. On both of my trekking pilgrimages through the Himalayan foothills in Nepal and across the Tibetan plateau, in addition to hoping to do the kora, the 33-mile circumambulation around Mount Kailas, the sacred mountain in Tibet, I secretly harbored the wish to see either a yeti or a snow leopard—or, ideally, both. Two of the porters on my 1999 pilgrimage told me they had seen a yeti, though not in the section of the Himalayas that we traversed. The Sherpas and several of the porters on both the 1999 and the 2001 trips had seen a snow leopard. I have seen a snow leopard as recorded on a motion-sensitive camera set up in the Tibetan mountains, but it is not the same as seeing one in person.

For me, as I believe it was for Peter Matthiessen, the snow leopard can be understood both literally and as a metaphor. Either way, it is something I seek. It is not going to come to me; I have to come to it. The snow leopard is rare because we have destroyed its natural habitat or have killed it to the point of extinction because its coat is highly prized by haute couture designers. Is this what we have done in our packaging of the teachings of Jesus, of Buddha, of Lao Tzu?

Then again, is the snow leopard the goal of the journey, that which we seek, or is the journey the goal of the journey? I know, this is beginning to sound like a Zen koan, and Zen koans, if nothing else, can be confusing. I hope it's not a spoiler for those of you who might be inclined to read his book, but Peter Matthiessen never got to see the snow leopard that he sought. However, after the trip, he wrote the following:

*Yak-butter tea, wind pictures, the Crystal Mountain, and blue sheep dancing in the snow.
Have you seen the snow leopard?
No! Isn't that wonderful?*

How could Matthiessen write this? What did he mean when he said that not seeing the snow leopard that he sought, the snow leopard that was the goal of his journey, his pilgrimage, was "wonderful?" (You see what I was saying about Zen koans? They're not only confusing; they're also frustrating!)

When I first read this quote, I thought of Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. Near the end of the story, when Siddhartha, now enlightened, meets his old childhood friend, Govinda, Siddhartha tells Govinda that it may be because he is seeking overmuch that he cannot find; it is because he has his desire set on a specific goal that he cannot see what is right before his eyes. Perhaps the yak-butter tea, the wind pictures, the Crystal Mountain, and the blue sheep dancing on the sides of the snow-covered Himalayan mountains are enough! Maybe what we have in the present, what is right before our eyes, as Siddhartha suggested to Govinda, is more than enough!

I will come back to the other quote by Peter Matthiessen, the one I included in my reflection *Keeping in (Virtual) Touch 29*, and also the other quote I included in that missive, the one by Walter Percy, a little later. First let me address the matter of whether our Christian faith provides us with answers or ultimately leaves us with more questions, consigning us (dooming us?) to become seekers.

This past week, as I struggled to be a pastor and/or psychotherapist to several individuals who are struggling with chronic pain, serious disease, or who are going through a difficult time, people whose faith is being challenged by the events of their lives, I was reminded of a pastoral conversation that took place in the early years of my ministry. The man who contacted me informed me that he was looking for a church, but first he would like to speak with the pastor to determine how he/she would answer several religious questions.

I found this refreshing. Many parishioners are apologetic about asking the "big" questions under the assumption that "real" Christians shouldn't have questions. They were taught that they should never question what they learned in Sunday school, what they were taught in CCD, or what it says in the Bible. As those who attend our church study groups can testify, if you have questions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the spiritual journey, the efficacy of prayer, the meaning of life, and why the world is the way it is, you have come to the right place! That is, as long as you aren't looking for answers!

The man began our meeting by saying that since I was a religious professional, he wanted to hear what I had to say. I told him I didn't consider myself a religious professional, that I am more of an amateur, but I said I would give it a try. The man took out his notebook and began to read his questions.

The first question: "If God is all good and all powerful, why is there evil in the world?" I told him it probably had something to do with free will, a gift that is apparently so precious to God that God tolerates the consequences of its abuse. This answer was not acceptable. The man told me it was logically inconsistent (though I'm not sure why). I then suggested that perhaps God is not all good and all-powerful, at least in the way we commonly define those terms, that God might have a shadow side or that there is an ontological reality to evil, a power that can truly possess us. This also didn't fly. I finally had to tell him I didn't know the answer to that question.

The second question: "When we have so much food in this country, why do people starve to death?" I responded that this was an easy one: it is because we don't

share. This, apparently, didn't answer his real question. The man wanted to know how a God who cared about little children could allow them to go to bed hungry. I said I thought God cares about little children and does not want them to go to bed hungry, but God basically wants us to come to our senses and share our food with them. If we all followed the teachings of Jesus, we would do this. The man was not satisfied with these answers.

Third question: "If God is just, why did a prominent celebrity go free when everyone in the country (with the exception of twelve people) believed he was guilty of killing his wife? I told him that was also an easy one: the celebrity had a lot of money and an excellent team of lawyers. The man said this was a travesty of justice. I agreed. When he asked how God could allow this to happen, I said I didn't see God as a micromanager, determining the outcome of every event, including (and perhaps especially) criminal trials. I suspect that God might want us to improve our legal system, e.g., by taking the death penalty off the table since our legal system is obviously flawed. The man said I hadn't really answered his question. (I thought I had.)

The next question: "Why do some Mafia dons live to a ripe old age while some little children die of cancer?" I replied that it might be a matter of genetics; some criminals are just physically healthier than some little children. This wasn't the answer the man sought. He asked if I thought the Mafia don would be punished after his death. I said I had no idea what God did with souls, with that little spark of consciousness that lives on after the death of the body. Part of me would like the Mafia don to be punished, but this isn't a central part of my theology and I wouldn't find it particularly comforting to know that the Mafia don would be suffering in the blazing fires of hell for all eternity (which, by the way, is a very long time). I told my interrogator that decisions regarding the ultimate and eternal balancing of the scales take place above my pay grade. Once again, the man found my answer less than satisfactory.

The man then asked why history is basically a record of war. First, I told him I agreed with his assessment of history. In the past century alone, over one hundred million human beings died as a direct result of war. I told him I thought mankind was responsible for an awful lot of suffering. By the way, this conversation took place before I became politically correct. Now I would have to say "humankind" rather than "mankind." I wouldn't want to give the impression that most of the wars throughout history were caused by men. However, come to think of it, they were! As Michael Moore has suggested in his book, *Stupid White Men*, most of the problems he has encountered in his personal life were caused not by bad or angry Black men but by "stupid white men." This has also been my experience. This answer, too, was unacceptable.

The final question from his notebook was in relation to how long this suffering is going to last. When is the kingdom of God going to be established upon the earth? When will Satan finally be defeated? Did I think that Christ's Second Coming would occur in our lifetime? I noted that Jesus told us not to waste our time trying to determine the day and the time, but we should always be ready, living each day fully, living each day as if it were the last. This, too, didn't fly. I also considered telling him that I thought that the Second Coming was more of an inner, spiritual event than an outer, cosmological event, but I had a sense that this, too, would have been found unacceptable.

I began to realize that this man was unhappy with life the way it was, or with his life as it was, or at least with life and his life as he experienced them. If his ultimate question was why the universe is the way it is, why human beings are the way they were, and why his life has turned out as it has, my answer would have to be, "I don't

have a clue.” As a psychologist, however, I might be able to help him with the last one—his life as he experienced it.

As I sat there pondering how to respond to questions that I considered legitimate but unanswerable, at least by me, my eye happened to fall upon a quote by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke which was posted on the bulletin board over my desk. In his advice to a young poet, Rilke tells the young man to *Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps someday far in the future you will gradually, without even knowing it, live your way into the answers.*

Rilke seems to be saying that we don't *get* the answers; we can't be *given* the answers; rather, we need to *live our way into* the answers. This is a very important distinction! Rilke also suggests that the way to living into the answers is to begin by loving the questions.

I took the quote down from the bulletin board and gave it to my friend to read. I suggested that the questions he was raising were good questions, but he might think about being a little more patient with them. I told him that people in our church were struggling with the same sort of questions, maybe even the exact same questions, but we have an advantage: *we do so together as a community of faith.* I suggested that if we are patient toward our unresolved questions, one day we just might live our way not into *the* answer but into *our* answer.

The man informed me that he wanted the *real* answers, and that if I didn't have them, he would seek them elsewhere. He closed his notebook and walked out of the office. I never saw him again. However, I said a little prayer for the next pastor he was going to interview.

I thought about that little exchange this past week. Perhaps I should have given the man more answers. But I don't have the answers. I certainly don't have *the* answers, and it wouldn't do any good to pretend I do. I have *my* answers, but I don't think my answers would help him or anyone else for that matter. We have to find our own answers. Rilke suggests that we do this by struggling with the questions. He also suggests that patience is an important part of this struggle. It sounds like he might be saying that, if we are patient, this struggle will shape our soul.

As you know, one of my favorite quotes is from the English romantic poet John Keats. Keats, in a letter to a friend, once said, “Call the world, if you will, the Vale of Soul-making. Then you will know the purpose of the world.” I like that! What if this whole thing is not about being saved or damned for all eternity; what if it is about how our walk through the (sometimes lonesome) valley of this earthly life shapes our soul?

Our gospel reading presents a possible response to the man's questions, a response I didn't have the sense to make at the time. The response, which may or may not have been helpful to my friend, was the response that Jesus gives to John's disciples.

As you remember, John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, is languishing in prison. The fiery preacher who called people to repent has been silenced. He sits alone awaiting his immanent death. The directive John gives to his followers leads us to believe that John has lost his faith. He who told Jesus that he was not worthy to baptize him, that he was not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal, now questions whether Jesus is the Messiah. John seems to have forgotten the opening of the heavens, the descending dove, and the voice from heaven that said, “This is my beloved son.” John sends his

disciples to Jesus, directing them to ask Jesus if he is *really* the one who is to come or whether they would have to wait for another.

Jesus doesn't reassure John's disciples that he is the one for whom the people of Israel longed. Instead, Jesus tells them there is no need to wait, no reason to look past the present to the future for the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. He says to them,

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Tell John what you hear and see. The answer to your question is right in front of you. Open your ears. Open your eyes. The answer is not in the future but the present! This is what I would say today to the man who was struggling with these existential questions. Look around you. What do you see? It might not have worked, but it probably would have been better than shrugging my shoulders and confessing that I didn't have a clue.

We long for the state of affairs that is promised by the prophet Isaiah. However, it presently seems to be little more than an idealistic dream. Israel and the Palestinians seem to be constitutionally incapable of establishing a just and lasting peace. The Buddhist genocide of the Rohingya Muslims continues in Myanmar, which is now in the throes of a military coup. Wars and genocides continue in parts of Africa. Homegrown extremists around the world, and even here in our own country, have turned to terror as the tool for social and political change. People around the world, and even in our own country, long for a fascist dictator who will "set things right." Even in our country, with all our resources, people go to bed hungry. Over 500,000 people in Massachusetts go to bed hungry every night.

In the gnostic Gospel of Thomas (#113), Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth; we just have to open our eyes to see it. We read,

His disciples said to him: "On what day will the kingdom come?" Jesus said, "It will not come while people watch for it; they will not say: 'Look, here it is,' or 'Look, there it is;' but the kingdom of the father is spread out over the earth, and men do not see it."

This reminds us of the passage in Luke 17:20-21:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

An alternative translation of the word "among" appears in the footnotes of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as "within." So, the kingdom of God is either among us or within us—or both!

The healing, reconciling power of Christ is already at work in the world. If we open our eyes, if we see with our hearts, which the French writer/poet Antoine de Saint-Exupery, in *The Little Prince* tells us we must do, we will see that the heavenly kingdom is already a reality both within and among us.

Look around you! You don't have to just look at the beauties of nature, which are bountiful (including several strikingly beautiful sunsets this past week and the little birds that come daily to our bird feeder). Good things are happening inside us and outside us. Medical miracles happen every day. People are finally being vaccinated against this dreaded coronavirus. People are working for peace and justice around the world. Even

in Myanmar, people are protesting the military coup and the imprisonment of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Look around you! In this country, following the death of George Floyd, we began to become much more sensitive to the systemic racism that pervades our culture and poisons our souls. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, and Church World Service distribute food and medicine to those who need it. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish girl, has mobilized her generation and shamed ours into belatedly addressing the crisis of climate change, and President Biden has already taken steps to reverse some of the environmentally damaging policies of the past administration. Within each city, volunteers are reaching out to homeless drug addicts, offering them food, medical care, friendship, and hope. Acts of caring and compassion take place in our own community, in our own little church. If we do our part as individuals and as a church, we will usher in the kingdom of God *by incarnating it here and now*.

What I should have had the sense to tell that man, my questioner, was that the answers to our ultimate philosophical or theological questions lie not in the future but in the present!

The apostle James, in his letter, calls us to be patient. The patience of which James speaks is not to be confused with passivity. It is grounded in an active, anticipatory confidence that is possible because we trust that, while God may not micromanage the universe to eliminate suffering and injustice, it is still God's world and it is a beautiful world! Because we trust in God, we confront the problems, the unsolved questions of our lives from a stance of faith. Remember, the Greek word that is translated as "faith" in our Bible really means trust.

Like the man who came seeking answers, we all have questions. We all seek answers. Think about it. What are the questions that are unresolved in your heart? They may be questions about the world, about the pandemic, about the millions of lives that have been lost. They may be questions about someone you love. They may be questions that arise from your own struggles, your own suffering. They may be questions about why your life has unfolded the way it has, why it has not gone the way you hoped it would. These are the questions that bring you to church or to this newsletter/reflection. These are the questions we can bring to God in prayer.

Isaiah tells us to carry these questions with hope, with faith in our hearts. Isaiah assures us that it is God's will that the earth be filled with abundance, that people live together in peace. In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." God is already working; God is always working to make this happen. If we open our ears and eyes, we will see that beautiful things are happening within us and all around us!

As you know, I am an incurable optimist! I believe that the worldwide threat of terrorism will fade away; if we can move past a militaristic, imperialistic way of thinking, it will happen even quicker. The pain that is caused by our prejudices against people of a different race, ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religion will fade away; if we let Jesus help us move past our closed-minded response to those who are different, it will happen even quicker. When we take the risk of considering other alternatives to declaring war on countries that we designate as evil, the peaceable kingdom of which Isaiah speaks will be even more widely spread upon the earth.

Why do people have to become sick and die? Why do our loved ones betray or desert us? Why do bad things happen to good people? Is it really unfair? Does this question even mean anything? Isn't it true that life is just what it is? What does it mean to trust in God in a time of trial? How do we find the strength we need to go on with our life, to live our life fully and joyfully despite the burdens that weigh us down?

As I tried to tell that man, I don't know the answer to these questions. If you are looking for simple answers, you will have to try another church or at least another pastor. Even if I did have the answer to these questions, they would be *my* answers, or they would be packaged, simplistic, and patently absurd answers. They would not be *your* answers. Ultimately, *only your answers will be helpful to you*. And these answers are shaped in the crucible of the refining fire of life.

If we listen to the comforting, guiding words of scripture, we do not find answers as much as we find a way to carry the questions that haunt us. Isaiah tells us we do have to wait, but that we need to wait with hope. James tells us we do need to wait, but we need to wait with patience. Jesus tells us to open our ears and our eyes that we might see the healing that is already going on in the world, in our relationships, and within us. I also believe that this trust, this faith is grounded in presence, in a sense of the presence of God, in a sense of the presence of Jesus, in a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives right here and now.

"Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves." We need to be patient with our questions. We also need to remember that we do not have to struggle with them alone. We can do so in the context of our religious tradition, our religious faith. We can do so as members of a community of faith, a fellowship of those who are searching not so much for a *transcendental answer* to these questions, but a *transcendental presence*.

We need to open our hearts to this transcendental presence, the presence of our Lord in our worship and in our daily lives. Then we need to open our hands that we, his disciples, might become a part of this healing process in the lives of those around us, in the lives of our brothers and sisters who are in tremendous need around the world. Peter Matthiessen was on a search. He literally (and metaphorically) conceptualized his pilgrimage as a search for the beautiful but rare snow leopard. Matthiessen was/is a seeker. This appears to be his nature. Many of us are also seekers. Not all of us, but many of us. Many of us feel, as Walter Percy has put it, *The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.*

As I mentioned in my previous missive, some of us, from time to time, have an epiphany; we get a momentary glimpse of that heavenly realm from which we came, which we carry with us and within us throughout our life, and to which we will return after we die. Jesus got a glimpse of this at the time of his baptism. And this can happen to us as well. As Peter Matthiessen has put it, *Soon the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day, we become seekers.*

Matthiessen challenges us to think about that which we seek. Do we seek answers? But we didn't have "answers" when, as a child, we were one foot or more than one foot in that "other" world, the world from which we came. Perhaps the journey itself, a journey that is marked more by questions than answers, a journey that has more to do with "shaping soul" than saving our soul, is what we truly seek. *Perhaps what we seek is not transcendental answers but a transcendental presence.* Perhaps, if we embark upon this life-long pilgrimage, we will find that yak-butter tea, wind pictures, the Crystal

Mountain, and blue sheep dancing on the slopes of snow-covered mountains in the Himalayas are enough—and more than enough.
Perhaps it's time for you to begin the journey, to begin the search. As Rilke has said,
*You are not too old and
it is not too late
to dive
into your increasing depths
where life calmly gives out
its own secret.*

In the midst of so much darkness, and in the search for simple/simplistic answers to the questions we must learn to treasure in our hearts, please don't let the light go out.