

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany | Year B | Mark 1:29-39; Isaiah 40:21-31

February 4th 2018

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Anyone who has ever read or listened to holy scripture seriously -- and I count all of you in that crowd -- have probably, at one point or another, struggled with certain passages and how we might understand them given the context of our everyday lives. When many approach the Bible, it is often with the hope that, through it, God will speak to us in a way that is crystal clear and useful -- that the Bible would be a sort-of catch-all guidebook for how to live. Anyone who really *has* struggled with scripture has probably found that *not* to be the case -- because the Bible does *not* mention every circumstance we will find in life, and it is notably silent on many topics we might like it to address. It is a rare experience to open the Bible to a random page only to have the words jump off the page in a relevant manner that miraculously comments on something happening in your life in this exact, present moment. That's not to say it's impossible, of course -- sometimes it *is* that simple and a quick word of scripture is all we need to hear. But had you told me nine months ago that the lectionary for *this* Sunday contained the phrase "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles," I probably wouldn't have attributed Isaiah's 2,500-year-old prophecy as a prediction of success to the *Philadelphia* Eagles, but I suppose on a day like today we can thank the Almighty for gracing us with a good football team.

But when it comes to an average day, the day-to-day of our normal lives, perhaps the question that comes to mind the most when reading scripture is "how does the scripture I hear in Church apply to my life?" or "how am I supposed to use what I read in the Bible in my daily life?"

These are questions that most likely have very different answers for each of us -- answers that are as different as we are -- though I might encourage us to think about them by starting in the same place --- and that is to re-think the question itself. When we think of "how to apply the Bible," what goes unsaid is that we're already treating it as something that is foreign to us, or that it's some kind of instant cure to a problem that we have. We "apply" Neosporin and Band-Aids to a papercut to fix it as soon as possible. Or a mechanic "applies" all that he or she has learned to quickly fix your car and get you on your way. We want papercuts to heal really fast, and no one likes being stuck at the shop with their car longer than they need to. And both of those things are well and good. But when we expect the written word of God to act the same way we are often disappointed. Truly, I'm not sure that holy scripture *does* apply to our lives in the way that many people think it does. We are a people of convenience, and with the answer to almost every question ready to go with a quick Google search on the phones in our pockets, to take something slowly, to struggle with it, to work on it, to really dig into something is a rare phenomenon today. Yet that's the kind of attention and process that the Bible demands of those who read it. It cannot "apply" to our lives as many things do as if the good news of Christ is something that has to yield to our lives or as if it didn't belong there in the first place but rather simply comes in handy when we need it most.

Instead, the questions we might ask ourselves are quite different. They do not have immediate answers. If anything, they're inconvenient. But they're worth it.

For example, I would encourage anyone who reads or hears scripture regularly to reflect slowly on it and demand little of it. We're so accustomed to thinking about something's immediate usefulness that it has become more difficult simply to sit with what we've heard. To ponder it. To wonder about it. To fight with it. To embrace it. Instead of questioning how scripture might give us what we want, it can be far more fruitful to wonder how God might be speaking to us through it. We may desire God to show up exactly how and where we want God to show up, but we may need to go

where God is leading us, not where we desire to lead God. Admittedly, this is the harder path. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the Episcopal Church's way of doing things is to seek the gray areas of life instead of the black and white. To embrace the ambiguous because we know that God just might be in the unexpected. To hear the word of God and know that it may not have an immediate impact but rather a lasting presence that abides.

Of course, all of this takes time, that precious commodity that seems to be more valuable than anything else we might produce. It's also something one must make to listen for the still, small voice of God that weaves in and out of the pages of holy scripture like a vine or ivy that, given time, covers and holds all things. And if you don't believe me, believe Jesus, who, though he had more things on his plate than all of us do, still made time to reconnect with God. It would be easy to gloss over today's Gospel reading, especially the second half of it where Mark recaps some of Jesus' activity in the early days of his ministry in Galilee. Yet there is a phrase that might stick out given our consideration of taking the time and making the time to pray and reflect -- "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." I am not necessarily suggesting we do the same, but at least let us think about what this would have meant for Jesus. More important than sleep, and in this specific moment, more important than all of the people Jesus healed that day, was his need to make time to pray. "In the morning while it was still very dark" -- this would have been the very first thing he did, undoubtedly for him the most important thing he did, and most likely, the slowest thing he would have done all day. You can almost picture it. While the rest of his disciples were sleeping, Jesus awoke in the pitch black of 3 or 4 in the morning, rubbed his eyes, adjusted to the darkness, stood up, and made his way to somewhere to be alone. Quietly. Without the rush of the day. He made time. It couldn't have been terribly convenient, nor would this excursion have been helpful if it had ended quickly. In fact, we know this is something Jesus did regularly. It was not a quick fix to a problem nor was it a quick moment that he applied to the rest of his life. It *was* his life.

As we get closer and closer to Lent, I invite you to think and pray about *your* life and the time you spend with God and with holy scripture. If that time is shorter than you'd like it to be, or if you even feel it's almost nothing at all, that's ok. As you know, Lent can be a faithful time in which we give something up, but it can also be a time in which we take something on, something we'd like to continue, a spiritual practice or a routine that might bring us closer to God. I invite you to think and pray about the life of Jesus, he who very much knew what it was like to have a busy schedule and many demands made of him yet made time to pray and know the scriptures. And I invite you to trust in the slow work of God -- that though we may often want a quick response to our prayers or something we can apply right away in our lives, may we trust our heavenly Father as Jesus did, making time to ponder the words of holy scripture, and to remember and hold fast to the words we have heard this day, that "those who *wait* for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles."

Amen.