
Waking Up and Being Priests

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Lent 4 – Year B**

On 14 March 2021, The Cathedral of St. Philip convened an inside worship service for the first time after a complete year of Social Distance for the Common Good. We had cancelled services last year, on March 15, 2020. The service on 14 March 2021 was the Holy Eucharist, but we began with a Gathering Silence, the Lord's Prayer, a reading of Psalm 126 ("When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream"), and a Reflection from Dean Sam Candler.

Here are the texts of Dean Candler's Reflection and his Sermon for that holy and joyous day.

The Reflection

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
then were we like those who dream" (Psalm 126:1).

Grace and peace to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Wow, you look perfectly beautiful this morning! It is wonderful to see you. It is overwhelming to be praying again inside this holy space. Thank you so much for being here.

That's what this morning feels like, like we are waking up from a dream! I have seen some of you in my dream – walking in the neighborhood, at the grocery stores, at the Labyrinth, in my memories! Or, at least it seemed like you. And now, we can begin to see each other a bit more clearly.

Maybe this past year has been a nightmarish kind of dream. But, maybe, for some of us, the year has been a kind of retreat, a spiritual exercise. (I will talk about that in my sermon this morning. Right! Today, you get to hear both a reflection and a sermon from me!)

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and we will be praying the entire Eucharistic Prayer this morning, not using the shortened Koinonia service which we have been using outside. And we will sing – or at least, say—some strange texts today. For instance, we will use "Welcome Happy Morning." That is an Easter hymn, and today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent! But we sing it today, because today is a happy morning.

It is so, so wonderful to see you! We still have lots of restrictions in how we worship, and I will mention those at the Parish Notices. But, meanwhile, there is no waiting list today!

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then we were like those who dream. We are waking up this morning. Thank you for being here!

Welcome Happy Morning!

The Sermon: Waking Up and Being Priests

Psalms 126 and “Welcome Happy Morning” are not part of the assigned lectionary for today, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, but these last two readings are, from the Book of Numbers and the Gospel of John. And this Numbers lesson is a bit weird.

There are several curious and delightful stories in the Old Testament that, seemingly, don't make any scientific sense! There's one, in particular about Jacob trying to gain his future father-in-law's flocks. He devises a plan to breed striped goats that makes no scientific sense whatsoever! (It's at Genesis 31.)

And there is this one from the Book of Numbers. It's about Moses and his people out in the wilderness, and about snakes going around biting people everywhere. In order to heal them, save them, Moses puts up the bronze image of such a snake, on a stick, above the people. If people are bitten by a snake, they can then take a small look at this bronze serpent, and they survive.

Yes, it doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Until. Until, we examine vaccines. And inoculations.

As we are all aware these days, vaccines enable our bodies to resist disease by introducing a very small dose of the disease into our body and thus teaching our body to resist it. Maybe like gazing upon a small image of a snake and thus becoming immune to its bite?

With vaccines, when one part of the body learns to resist the disease, the entire body can learn to resist the disease. And then the people around us don't get the disease either! Communities are bodies, too! Communities become resistant, when enough of us are vaccinated!

It's beautiful science, and the same is true for the spiritual life. Here is what I mean.

We are meant to practice the encountering of spiritual disease, too, especially when we take on spiritual disciplines and retreats. We are supposed to face the spiritual diseases in our own lives, too, not avoid them. I mean things like greed, envy, hate, bitterness, apathy. Evil. These diseases live inside each of us, even to the smallest degree. The way to defeat them is to learn to acknowledge them, even the slightest touch of them, before they grow into more deadly diseases. Our admission and confession is what can inoculate us from their larger expressions!

That's what the purpose of a spiritual retreat is. Maybe that practice has been something going on in us this past year, in a kind of forced retreat. I hope we have been courageous enough to face the small doses of disease that came our way, before they grew into large calamities!

Jesus knew that the way of love would be to face such pains and diseases, and to bear such pains, for the whole world. He knew that his journey would mean his being lifted up – high on the cross, high on the tree like those Mosaic snakes! He said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

But this image, of Jesus, is not magic. Jesus loves us enough to take on our illnesses and sins, to bear the maladies of spiritual pain, and physical pain, with us.

We all have probably heard the famous bible verse, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (After all, the verse is painted on barn doors all over the Georgia countryside!)

But sometimes we skim over the next verse, John 3:17, which I think is equally as important: “For God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” That is one of the most important verses in our lesson today.

Love, and the love of God, means no condemnation. It is one of the principles I have been trying to practice since this pandemic began. It is true today, more than ever. “First, no judgement,” I tell people. No condemnation. People have been struggling and managing throughout this past year in all sorts of different ways; I do not condemn those ways. People, all of us, are already feeling judged and condemned daily this past year, in all sorts of ways. I do not want to be adding to the judgement and condemnation.

In a world of condemnation, God loves. That's the kind of God I want to follow. In a world of condemnation, the Church is to be a different kind of presence in people's lives.

You know, for so much of my ministry, I have been trying to teach people that Christianity, and the Church, is not an insurance policy, and it is not a police officer. We are not a place where you get some heavenly

insurance policy. And we are not a place that simply administers laws over and over again.

The Church is not meant to be the perpetual police officer! You know, the system that is always saying, "You've done this wrong. You've crossed that line. You've broken that law." Now, of course, our world does need police officers, of course, to enforce laws. I believe in them! But that is not our role, as a church. Too many people have grown up seeing the church as a police officer instead of as a priest.

Yes, I said "priest." Our role, as a church, is to be priests. I mean all of us, not just the people we ordain as official priests, like this wonderful clergy staff here at the Cathedral. I mean everyone who is in this room today, or hearing these words. We are to be priests, all of us.

A priest is someone who bears the pain of another, who endures the illnesses of others. Like a serpent lifted up on a stick. Like Jesus. A priest is someone who even takes on the illnesses of others, becomes infected with them, and for them, so that they—and the world—can be healed.

That is the ministry of Jesus, and it is the ministry of each of us. We are to be holy serpents for each other. We are to be priests for each other. We are to be like Jesus for each other, willing to be lifted up so that the world itself may be saved.

Every time we bear another person's burden, we are being the vaccine for that other person. Like Jesus, every time we bear another person's burden, we are being a vaccine for that other person. In acknowledging the burdens of that other person, sharing them, we are somehow enabling that person, that body, that system, to become healthy. It's a holy miracle, like setting up an image for someone in need to gaze upon.

And when we help that other person to be healthy, even just one other person, we are helping the entire world to be healthy. We are saving the world. Just like an effective vaccine. The world "salvation," comes from the word "salve," which means to make well, to make healthy. "For God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." That is our ministry, too, the ministry of each us. We are waking up today, and we are being priests. Thank you.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip