

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
Mark 1:29-39

The Collect

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes on high and see:

Who created these?

He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,

not one is missing.
Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their
strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c Page 804, BCP

Laudate Dominum

- 1 Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God! how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!
- 2 The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.
- 3 He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.
- 4 He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names.
- 5 Great is our LORD and mighty in power; there is no limit to his wisdom.
- 6 The LORD lifts up the lowly, but casts the wicked to the ground.
- 7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make music to our God upon the harp.
- 8 He covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth;

9 He makes grass to grow upon the mountains and green plants to serve mankind.

10 He provides food for flocks and herds and for the young ravens when they cry.

11 He is not impressed by the might of a horse; he has no pleasure in the strength of a man;

12 But the LORD has pleasure in those who fear him, in those who await his gracious favor.

21c Hallelujah!

Mark 1:29-39

Jesus left the synagogue at Capernaum, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

SERMON

I have been blessed throughout my life with mentors. A mentor might be a teacher who imparts knowledge to a student, but the most important mentors are those who demonstrate wisdom in their very lives. From those I learn the most important things. One of my mentors tutors children in the art of creative writing. His position is that the public schools are neglecting the art of story telling. He seeks to address that gap. In doing so, he quite often counsels those he teaches with these words, “Don't tell me. Show me.” This is very good advice, both for school children learning to write effectively and for elderly preachers who sometimes wander in the woods. Don't tell me. Show me.

Last year, we read from Matthew. Matthew is the “tell me” Gospel. It is filled with sayings, parables and teachings of Jesus. This year, we read from Mark. Mark

is the “show me” Gospel. Mark makes his case not on what Jesus said, but on what Jesus did. Where Matthew tells us of Jesus' genealogy, of a birth accompanied by heavenly signs that even nature is aware of the change in Creation, changes so extreme that news of it reaches into the chambers of Herod the Horrible, Mark shows us a woman with a fever.

Jesus left the synagogue at Capernaum, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

In Mark's telling, Jesus isn't who he is because of his wise sayings, or his ability to argue points of Jewish law. His very actions speak of the existence of power unsuspected by the people of the time. Jesus' actions say, “Something big is happening. Your world is chang-

ing. Pay attention!” The power of Jesus' actions in Mark lies in mystery, just as do our lives. Our lives are such unlikely things for a universe to produce that we must acknowledge the mystery behind our existence or live stunted lives. Jesus brings the mystery to the house of Simon and his mother-in-law and demonstrates that it is no fantasy. Could such a demonstration find soil in which to grow in 21st Century America? We are very different people, with very different understandings, and an atrophied appreciation of the power of mystery.

I just finished a very interesting book titled “The Swerve” by Stephen Greenblatt. The author proposes that the atomism of Epicurus, who lived in the 4th Century before Christ, informed the humanist movement in the 15th Century which lead to the Renaissance, and ultimately to us. I read a lot of fun stuff like that. Mr. Greenblatt is convinced that Epicurus won out and thus

his view formed the soil from which we spring. In his words,

And the enlightenment he [Epicurus] offered did not require sustained scientific inquiry. You did not need a detailed grasp of the actual laws of the physical universe; you needed only to comprehend that there is a hidden natural explanation for everything that alarms or eludes you. That explanation will inevitably lead you back to atoms. If you can hold on to and repeat to yourself the simplest fact of existence—atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else—your life will change.

Atoms and void and nothing else. What an arid landscape, and how like our lives today! We don't need to know much about particle physics to comprehend that we, and everything else, are made of atoms. We don't need to know much about astronomy to comprehend that space is really, really empty for miles and miles and

miles. You just wouldn't believe how many miles or how empty. We can acknowledge these things, but we have vastly more difficulty in grasping that all this wonder rests on a foundation of mystery of the deepest sort. So, we turn to atoms and void and nothing else.

That is the soil in which we grow, and we have attempted, since at least the Enlightenment if not before, to graft the Gospel of Jesus Christ onto this barren vine, with mostly poor results. Nevertheless, I am convinced that however we try to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ into atoms and void and nothing else, there remains the small voice saying that our souls are born from mystery and into mystery we return.

In Shakespeare's play, "Hamlet", Horatio is a student at Wittenberg, and Wittenberg was a center of humanist thought of just the sort Epicurus urged. For Horatio, the world was atoms and void and nothing else. In

the play, he barges into the room where Hamlet is speaking with the ghost of his father. There is no place for ghosts in Horatio's understanding, and as the ghost rattles around beneath the stage, Horatio can only sputter, "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!" Hamlet advises him:

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Hor-
atio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The writer of Mark agrees with that. There **are** more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, and to make his case, Mark shows us them. What Mark shows us is that we are all birds on a wire, contentedly settled in, while power hums beneath our feet, unnoticed and unacknowledged, like the ghost of Hamlet's father under the stage. Mark is showing us that power in the most direct way.

I am not so skilled as Mark and I don't have access to Simon Peter's mother-in-law, but I share his need to show you the wonder and mystery into which we are born for without wonder, we are left in dryness from which no life can come. I couldn't live in such a desert. I simply do not understand our existence in this way. I want to raise my voice with that of Isaiah and shout:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

There are many things of wonder and mystery in the world to which I could address your attention, but I

have chosen a humble fungus known as *Pilobolus*¹. I suppose I could start with something gigantic, as I did once before, showing you the relative sizes of the planets and stars and trying to grant you a perspective on how huge and complex is the universe, but the more I think about it, the wiser it seems to start small. Few things are smaller or more humble than a fungus. Yet, as smart as we are, we can learn from a lowly fungus.

I would suggest that the marvel that is the miracle of *Pilobolus* is impossible to grasp from the perspective of Horatio's humanism. How could such wonder be, if all is atoms and void and nothing else? It exceeds my capacity to imagine how something so wondrous as *Pilobolus* could come to be within the intellectual desert in which the students of Wittenberg lived.

¹<http://herbarium.usu.edu/fungi/funfacts/pilobfc-t.htm>

So, by now you are probably wondering what could be so fantastic about a fungus, and it is this: the manner in which it has resolved the problem of reproduction. Pilobolus, you see, lives in cow dung. I understand completely that this is a life style you would not readily embrace, but it seems to suit Pilobolus well. It thrives in cow pats.

A young Pilobolus spore, just starting out, must first find an agreeable cow pat — no easy task if you are a fungus. What must happen is that a cow must eat a Pilobolus spore, subsequently depositing the spore and its new habitat upon the meadow, from which Pilobolus will produce new spores. This is an enormous problem for a Pilobolus spore because cows, being mammals, have a built-in revulsion to their own waste, and do not graze in it. The problem is to get the spore far enough away from the home cow pat so another cow might by

chance ingest it while nibbling grass, and start the process over.

Here is the miracle. *Pilobolus* has evolved a way to shoot its spores on to the grass quite a distance from its home cow pat. Its “shotgun” is a stalk swollen with cell sap, bearing a black mass of spores on the top. Below the swollen tip is a light-sensitive area. The light sensing region affects the growth of *Pilobolus* by causing it to face toward the sun. As the fungus matures, water pressure builds in the stalk until the tip explodes, shooting the spores into the daylight.

The spores fly away at 35 feet per second, at a height of six feet, and land as far away as 8 feet. *Pilobolus*, without knowing it, can shoot over a cow. Additionally, shooting the spores into the daylight gives them a better chance of landing in a sunny place where grass or other plants are growing. The cows that made the dung

for the previous batch of *Pilobolus* will probably eat these spore covered plants and start the process all over again.

To make this work, the spores must be indigestible so that they can pass through a cow unharmed. The *Pilobolus* fruiting body must have evolved a light-sensitive area which will keep the fungus “pointed” to the sun, whose heat will build the pressure in the stem of the fungus to sufficiently high pressure to propel the spore package over a cow. Then the spores must be able to cling to the plants where they land in order to re-enter a cow. This is a pretty impressive engineering problem for a fungus to undertake.

Horatio will tell you about the fungus evolving these characteristics as a result of random selection. I do not doubt that species evolve over time. What I DO doubt, what I cannot get my mind to accept, is that *Pilobolus*

came to this totally remarkable life cycle through purely random chance. Which is more difficult to believe? That Pilobolus randomly evolved into a shotgun with an aiming mechanism having spent countless generations stuck inside a cow with no way to reproduce, or that God himself, the ground of our being, the power in the wires beneath our feet, walked upon the earth to demonstrate that we are loved?

For me, it's no contest. Can I offer proof that the genius of the Pilobolus was arrived at by other than random forces? Of course not. If God could be the subject of investigation, He wouldn't be God. Nevertheless, does my heart reject the former and embrace the latter? Unquestionably. Will Horatio point out that I have only proved my faulty understanding of the power of random selection? Undoubtedly.

Too bad for Horatio. Faced with the strangeness that

is Pilobolus, he would be better off taking Hamlet's advice

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

Welcome that which your heart hears as true, for there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Return to [The Lectionary Page](#).