

The Reverend Kathy Boss
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Littleton, NH
Sermon
September 26, 2021
Proper 20, Track 2, Year B
“How Shall We Rise”

[Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29](#)

[Psalm 19:7-14](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

Over the last few weeks the scriptures we've read have presented us with a rich and interesting juxtaposition of Gospel and second New Testament reading.

In Mark we have listened in as the disciples grapple with a whole new way of viewing their Messiah and their place in the world as his followers, and we've heard Jesus correct them, quite harshly. In James we have been given teachings on how a church community should behave, and stark images of what can, and often does, go wrong, when we do not center the Spirit in our living.

In a time where, as Canon to the Presiding Bishop Stephenie Spellers writes, "...an alarming number of younger people simply do not know or care much about religious institutions at all," the interplay between the scriptures from Mark and James has a lot to teach us.

Spellers goes on to say of young people today, "If they notice us, they may see self-obsessed institutions bent on self-propagation. They may hear us promoting our churches as God's house. Since they've already met God outside, church isn't worth the extra hassle."¹

¹ Stephie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, loc. 221 Kindle version

"Self-obsessed institutions bent on self-propagation." That's quite an indictment--one might say, a harsh one.

Yet, how natural a reaction in our insecurities, our dwindling numbers, our dismissal as irrelevant, the fear that we as a church are dying, to want to circle the wagons, to build ourselves up again in the image we know.

These scriptures are an emphatic warning against that impulse. These impulses are a stumbling block to the light and love of the Spirit that enlivens and connects.

The Spirit that is always with us. Here in our midst. And everywhere!

Politics has used "If you're not with us, you're against us," at least since the time of Cicero and Julius Caesar, half a decade before the birth of Christ. Lenin used a version of it, as did Mussolini. Even our own President Bush used it in the wake of 9/11--"either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." It is a rallying cry for war, vengeance, and control.

In Matthew 12, Jesus uses the phrase "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." But he is not referring to people, or nations, he refers to Satan, to the denial of the Spirit. His use is purely conceptual, not meant to exclude, in fact he goes on to say, "And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven."

It is blasphemy against the Spirit that Jesus lashes out at in the scriptures we have read these past few weeks. He does not say to Peter--go away! You are clearly not with me if you would have me deny my true path. He says, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

Get behind me that which blasphemeth against the spirit. Peter, you, and all of you disciples who still do not understand, you are still with me, still beloved. But you must learn to put aside, unequivocally, those parts of yourselves that blaspheme the spirit. The tendency toward complaint, toward an easy way out, toward "not fair!", toward blame.

The Spirit is always with us, here in our midst, and everywhere.

It is a life devoid of Spirit that James warns us against, even as he gives us tools to nurture the connection to spirit--kindness, solidarity, mutual care, humility, truthfulness, wisdom. "...the wisdom from above [Spiritual Wisdom]," he writes, "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."²

In today's Gospel, Jesus flips the politically dividing with us/against us rhetoric. He wipes away black and white and makes room for sinners, for outsiders, for those still on the journey. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

He also flips the script on power. As living Christ, bringing us again and again and again back to that little child he holds in his lap, back to looking outward, finding allies instead of competitors, love instead of power or influence.

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Rather than wondering why we are dying as a church, why our numbers are dwindling, our influence fading, our integrity being questioned, let's ask instead, how shall we rise? With whom shall we rise? What shall we keep and what shall we cast away?

What are the eyes that look down with arrogance on others, or myopically in only one direction, causing us to stumble as we move and walk

² James 3:17 NRSV

in the Spirit? What are the hands that grasp and crave, that push others away, that fold across our chest in false certainty? What are the feet that take us away from the Spirit instead of toward it, that climb to heights of worldly power and influence, that leave the room when things get too vulnerable, too foolish, too challenging?

Let us cut those off. Let us look with new wise eyes at our tendencies to blaspheme the Spirit. Let us open our newly grown hands to others, welcome in all people, and let us step out on fresh feet, go out, to where the Spirit lives, to where people are doing Christ's work, without naming Christ.

The Spirit is here. It is all around us. Let us shift our focus. The self-obsession and self-propagation that Stephanie Spellers warns against, are a result of anxiety about dying, fading away. But the church will never die. The church will transform and will rise. The body of Christ will transform and rise. Because Christ is ever living, The Spirit is here.

So I ask you again and leave you with these questions: how shall we rise? With whom shall we rise? What shall we keep and what shall we cast away? What child needs our love and welcome? How can we make beautifully visible the Spirit? The Spirit that is here with us. And everywhere.