

**4 Epiphany – Year B – February 4, 2009**  
**Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28**  
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Like many of you, I just read William Paul Young's book, *The Shack*. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on God as a verb, and the stultification of life that comes with turning God and God's desires for us into laws and rules, like some nouns. Responsibility and expectations are two nouns that are twisted forms of the God-given ability to respond, and the joy of faithful expectancy. In the negative sense when these become rules, it sets us up to judge God and one another based on performance. Our life then becomes a series of duties, where we competitively compare our performance to that of others – mostly to make ourselves feel better. On the other hand, the noun faith, in the context of our life in God is not static, it is constantly in motion – growing, changing, questioning, doubting, filling our hearts, and active in sharing God's love. Movement is a theme of this week's Gospel reading. Jesus' own movement from his birth and early life to Capernaum. A movement of the spirit from the Scribes' legalistic interpretations of scripture to the faithful response of hearts filled with joy at Jesus' lively Word. Movement from dis-ease to wholeness of body, mind and spirit. Movement of the Word from the "the village of comfort" to the surrounding regions of Galilee.

Our definition of comfort is subjective and relative. Last week I was in Douglas at the Presbyterian conference. After traveling south, I stayed at an historic hotel established in 1907. More than a hundred years later, its charms are fading. My room looked more tired than I felt, and had no heating. There was a radiator. It was broken and served only to leak a dripping stream of cold water onto the surrounding carpet. The outdoor nighttime temperatures were in the twenties; indoors, probably hovering around fifty degrees. I kept my socks on, but I was still cold. Don't get me wrong, I'm not sharing this except to draw attention to the subjectivity and relativity of our notions of comfort. Even though I was miserable in the cold, I was also considering myself very lucky indeed to have relative warmth and safety.

Douglas lies on the border between Mexico and the U.S. Hundreds of migrant workers would have considered my hotel accommodations absolute luxury. My chill was nothing compared to sleeping in the sub-zero temperatures of the dangerous desert not two hundred yards from my window on the world. The economic reality of Mexico, among many of the poorer countries of the world, is that millions cannot find work that pays enough to support themselves or their families. Our economic policies have had a lot to do with plunging Mexico into even greater poverty. Corruption in the Mexican governments and police force, human and drug trafficking are making a bad situation even worse. Sheer desperation drives hundreds of our brothers and sisters from Mexico to seek work outside of their homeland in our relatively wealthy country. They risk their lives to feed and care for their families. As maybe you and I would also be driven to do if we did not have the public safety nets that are in place here in the U.S. including unemployment benefits, social security, food stamps, homeless shelters, food banks, charities and churches. Not to mention our more private relationships of friends, family and community, or other resources like our savings and investments. Consider this: where would we turn if our entire village or town, including all our family and friends were as poor as us? Where would we turn if we had no chance of a job, a family to feed, and few public benefits?

Historically, over hundreds of years, migrant workers have flowed in and out of the U.S. providing cheap labor for jobs that you and I do not want, for wages we would not accept. All that time, the border itself has moved up and down. A lot of acreage that we now call the U.S. was at one time, Mexico. Let's not forget that we don't own this strip of land, we are merely God's stewards of it! With our government's decision to build walls and fences, the movement of workers has not stopped, but it is now much more dangerous. Pushed outwards into the hostile desert, the risk is

higher, and the cost is terrible. The new business is human smuggling, and the coyotes are violent and ruthless. We have created a new slave trade, and once again, the innocent are dying. Wherever we live, such needless death diminishes us all. As we know, there is currently no adequate legal way for Mexican workers to enter the U.S., work, and return home to their families. Living in fear, they are easy targets of exploitative labor practices, often being paid ridiculously low wages. Many of our southern neighbors go into huge debt to pay a coyote around thirty-five hundred dollars for help in crossing the political border that stands between relative poverty and relative wealth. The irony is that in making the desperate choice to work in the U.S., many of these children of God die in the attempt.

This is, undoubtedly, a highly complex and tragic issue. The tragedy is human. The complexity is mostly centered around protectionism. The word protectionism is a noun. It is a noun twisted by our fear, and exemplified in a pervasive theology of scarcity. In God there is only abundance: an abundance of love and life, justice and mercy, and an abundance of compassion. Purportedly, the wall is to protect us from the threat of terrorists and to stop the flow of illegal drugs. Realistically, the wall does not stop the flow of drugs into the U.S., nor the reasons we are self-medicating. Our near neighbor, the city of Show Low, has the dubious reputation of being the 'meth' capital of Arizona. As for terrorists. The events of nine-eleven stand out as one of the worst terrorist acts in the history of the U.S. The men who hijacked the planes entered the U.S. quite legally with all the proper documentation, and at least one of those involved in the plot was born and raised in the U.S. Other examples also make the point. Did an illegal alien commit the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building? Or were either of the two teenagers who planned and perpetrated the shootings at Columbine illegal migrant workers? The list of homegrown terrorists goes on.

Our Gospel reading tells the story of the man with the unclean spirit. What other demons are still in our midst today? One may well be the distortion of laws into the unyielding and deadening noun of legalism, when we inappropriately stick to the letter of the law by trampling on the Spirit. Generally, our laws are for the common good, yet no human law should undermine human dignity or God's explicit call for justice. God also gave us *the* Law, meant to help us realize a greater dependence on God, and only fulfilled in Jesus Christ our Lord. When it comes to protectionism and our political border, the only thing to be exposed is the truth. Our life, safety and provision does not and cannot reside in lifeless structures, but only in the Living Word of God. By embracing fear, our ability to respond with God's love and compassion is seriously muted.

Exploitation is another noun that kills the Spirit, and another demon in our midst. We are all equal in God's sight. The abuse of power in any circumstance is wrong. God's way to defeat this demon is through God's justice, which is always intertwined with God's other attributes like love and mercy. You and I can do God's work in many ways. We can vote for and become advocates for economic reforms that promote equality and fairness. We can buy fair trade products that ensure a living wage to farmers in the poorest countries. We can heed God's call to welcome the alien in our midst, for we too were once aliens. We can share our incredible wealth to make a difference in the lives of those living in relative poverty and need. In doing so, we are putting into action what we learn from Jesus, and transforming the world in the ways He has taught us. This is how we live our faith, putting our trust in God, and acting on our God-given ability to respond with mercy and compassion. This is how we share our hope in the Lord and His gift of healing and salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is a verb. God's love is always active, moving us beyond our selves and our village of comfort, and closer to God.

Amen.