

Year B, Epiphany 4

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Deut. 18.15-20; 1 Cor 8.1-13; Mark 1.21-28

I started getting saved about eleven years ago.

We don't talk about being saved here in Episcopal churches, much. That's OK. And I don't mean saved exactly like some of our more evangelical brothers and sisters talk about it, but it is just as profound.

Let me tell you a little story about myself and me getting saved, because it is a story that is exactly what all three of our scripture passages are talking about. It is all about assumptions.

A lot of you know I was an officer in the Marine Corps. My name used to be Captain Was. And I spent four years zipping around the Mohave Desert in a tank blowing things up. It was great. But it started being not so great, so I left for a more corporate shore and got into management; had a bunch of employees, hundreds of millions of dollars of responsibility. Again, it was great, but being stuck in one building didn't suit me. So I went off into medical sales. It was hot. I did real well, bouncing around Western New England in a bright red Audi, selling surgical hardware for way too much money. I had a line on it. I was getting plaques and big bonus checks. I knew what was what, I played

the game and everything in my world was saying, “Keep on going, boy. You’re doing it right.”

And then, I reconnected with an old high school friend who was not living in the world I was living in. Nothing in this old friend’s world seemed to resonate with anything I had been learning and doing. She lived, barely, paycheck to paycheck as a social worker, had studied ecology and women’s studies, worked on a farm, lived with a bunch of rather peculiar housemates in a crumbling, though funky old farm house in the hills of Western Mass. I didn’t get it, none of it, it was weird, but she was an old friend whom I trusted, so I listened, and against all of my nature, suspended at least some of my judgment.

From her I learned about oppression. I heard about misogyny, and poverty, and domestic violence and Buddhism and psychotherapy and massage. I learned about locally grown and the coop down the street, and walking in the woods for fun and lots and lots of dogs.

I married this woman, Windy, eventually, and she helped save me, not by telling me that everything I thought I knew about the world was wrong and destructive and diametrically opposed to her life’s work (though it was), but she helped save me by helping me see that my entire world, our world, and our entire way of being in the world is based on assumptions that we make. What if things are not what you think?

Another story. Wendell Berry, the great agrarian thinker and writer and Wes Jackson, a pioneer of sustainable agriculture wrote letters back and forth about a conversation they

had about a rain drop. A friend had commented that if you consider a rain drop as it falls on the top leaves of a tree, and follow its movements down from leaf to leaf to branch to limb to trunk to soil and back into the water cycle, that you must consider that rain drop's journey as random. Sure, its random, right? How could it not be?

But Berry points out, that for us to definitively know that it is random, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that that rain drop's movement is not part of a larger pattern, we would need to have a universal knowledge of the workings of everything. Maybe that one rain drop's journey; maybe every rain drop's journey IS part of a giant metapattern that we, as finite critters could not know about. We need infinite data points to rule out a pattern. We make the assumption that it is random to describe and understand it. We don't know much about things we can't observe, so we fill in the gaps with assumptions. Maybe it is safer to ascribe it to mystery, or God. That rain drop descends from mystery, travels a course that we observe and then slurp, back into mystery.

We live in a world surrounded by revelation. We are immersed in revealed truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, thanks be to God. The wood in this pulpit does not lie. It is what it is. Like the button on your shirt or the wind passing by right now.

We, by grace, evolved into consciousness. A beautiful thing, but a challenging one, for the truth of revelation is not self-evident, it is filtered by our consciousness. We become less participants in revelation and more interpreters of revelation, meaning we observe the world, decide what it means, and act upon those decisions. And unless we are going

to spend all day every day pondering the meaning of our observations, we are going to have to make some assumptions or we are not going to get anything done.

What do we call all this observing and deciding? Knowledge, right. And an assumption is just a shortcut around this. An observation and decision is assumed, so we get right to acting. St. Paul tells us, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge, but anyone who loves God is known by him.” What would Paul say about assumptions?

Then there is Jesus, in his first public act of ministry in Mark. Teaching. People were astounded. There was awe in the air. He taught with authority; with moral, truthful authority, not like the scribes. The scribes in today’s world are the academics, interpreters of information (economists, political scientists, scientists of all types), and the lawyers and bureaucrats. Jesus casts out a demon, rather dramatically, but the folks come back to the teaching. “A new teaching – with authority!”

Jesus did not make assumptions. The authority in his teaching is that he made no assumptions. He observed the revealed truth, and acted upon it. He acted by spreading the word of the truth, healing, building relationships, loving all without reservation. There was no decision involved. That authority is wisdom. Observed truth acted upon. You don’t decide to be wise, you just become it.

But we here, all of us, human beings everywhere, we are not Jesus. We have to make assumptions to get by in the world. The key is, as Paul teaches, is that we have to understand the limits to our knowledge. No assumption that we make can go unquestioned. Not one.

What assumptions do you live by? Think of something you have never questioned and ask, “What would it mean if  $x$  were not true?” Think big. Let’s think together.

Do you assume that your 401(K) or 403(B) will be there for your retirement? Or Social Security? Maybe family or friends? Those are some assumptions worth interrogating at the moment.

Or more basically, do you assume that a dollar bill is worth something? Quite literally it is not. It is a phantom, having value based only on the assumption that we will continue to value it. It doesn’t even represent gold or sterling any more. It represents a gamble that other people want it. What if we assumed that money was in fact worthless? What if we assumed that good food and clean air and happiness are what is really important?

Or even more basic, what assumptions lie behind our valuing of the free market? Does Gross Domestic Product reflect real wealth or just our efficiency in changing resources into waste products? Does competition help us make life-giving decisions? Do we assume that we deserve wealth acquired through unearned gains in speculative markets?

Remember, collecting interest was prohibited to Christians from as far back as the Council of Nicea in 325, and that lasted for 1200 years! Something to think about.

With what assumptions do you raise your children? Is a pediatrician an authority on child rearing? Is your Mom? Just a question that needs asking...

Do you assume that your work spreads happiness and peace and wholeness to the world? Do you assume that you have no choice in the matter? You do; we all have a choice.

Do you assume that this is your lot in life or that you deserve the prosperity or bust you are in? None of us deserve anything but to be able to love and to be loved, to be safe, healthy and warm.

Do you assume that you are content? Do you assume you are happy or unhappy or depressed or satisfied? How can we know if we don't ask the questions? Real questions. Honest questions. Sometimes scary questions... because a question answered is a call to action. Asking them fully is an act of loving God, about the biggest demonstration of love for God we can do. That is what we promise to do in Baptism, to ask questions of the world in light of the love of God. We must do this.

Questions like these are the story of me being saved, and they are questions I struggle with every day. We make assumptions, it is impossible not to, but through faith, we are offered teaching with astounding authority. We have in God an enveloping

companionship that through the ages reminds us that we are not alone. With humility befitting a saint, we must question our assumptions. We must learn that anything and everything that we think we know might, just might not be as true as we assume. This is the truth of the prophets of Moses. Question assumptions, all assumptions, and you may find truth, and truth will set you free. AMEN