

“Recognizing Our Source of Strength”

Isaiah 40:21-31 & Mark 1:29-39

February 8, 2015

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Another scripture in our lectionary but which I did not include in our readings, seems fitting as prelude to my sermon this morning: From 1 Corinthians 9:16-18: “I don’t have any reason to brag about preaching the good news. Preaching is something God told me to do, and if I don’t do it, I am doomed. If I preach because I want to, I will be paid. But even if I don’t want to, it is still something God has sent me to do. What pay am I given? It is the chance to preach the good news free of charge and not to use the privileges that are mine because I am a preacher.” I do not ever forget what a privilege it is to be in this pulpit. This is a great gift you have given me while we await the next person to lead us and I am blessed and grateful. Let us pray:

O God, may our spirits open to You this morning that truly our words, our thoughts, the meditations of our hearts, will be aligned with You, our Rock, our Source of Strength, our Redeemer. Amen.

Another title for this sermon might have been “The Jet Set Jesus,” not the way we typically think of Jesus. But in Mark’s gospel Jesus is on the move, teaching, preaching, healing. Mark’s gospel is believed to be the first of the four gospels written in what we use as our New Testament. There is much speculation about who actually wrote this book. Whoever wrote it conveyed a sense of urgency. The word “immediately” is used 40 times, as though the whole story of Jesus’ life is rushing along towards his crucifixion.

The book was written for the guidance and support of Christians in a situation of intense crisis. Nero had blamed Christians for the destructive fire which

had seriously damaged Rome in 64 CE, to deflect the blame being directed towards he himself. Likely written between 65 and 72 C.E., martyrdoms had fallen off but there was no assurance, with Nero on the throne, when they might begin again: the last days could not be far off.

So we have a very busy Jesus. After healing a man in the synagogue, Jesus returns to Simon Peter's house, where he heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who has become quite ill with a fever. We don't fully appreciate what the passage is telling us here. Yes, she was ill with a fever. We likely think of a fever as something we drink a lot of fluids for and maybe take a little medicine to alleviate the symptoms. But in the ancient world, fever was often a symptom of a condition that would lead to death.

Jesus simply "raises her up" and the fever leaves her and she is restored to her role as hostess. This same word for raising up is used in many of the healings reported and even of Jesus himself. The word suggests that new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may again rise up to take their place in the world. And, by the way, what we are to understand is not that she was an unliberated woman who got up and started supper for them after her miraculous recovery, but that she was able to fully participate in the life she had been on her way to losing.

So word travelled fast and all kinds of people are now being brought to Jesus for help. He is occupied healing the sick and demon possessed of Capernaum. And, once again, this is not just about feeling better, but in that culture being healed really involves being restored to the community and to the person's role in it.

Jesus' schedule has been exhausting. He has been "imparting new strength," as the verb implied, restoring people to their rightful place in society, no small task. And he has performed these healings one after another. So in verse 35 we read that "He rose and went out to a lonely place and there he prayed."

Now, as you know, I am a big proponent of finding quiet places and devoting ourselves to prayer. Through the centuries, others have noted the importance of this. The psalmist wrote: "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." Another one of my favorites was from Meister Eckhart in the 13th century who wrote that "Nothing in the universe resembles God so much as silence." But

something else captured my attention in this: what happened in that silence? What was Jesus thinking? Saying? Praying?

This week was a hard week. The symptoms of the previous week's cold I had contracted seemed to have mostly subsided. But the fatigue clung to me like a heavy cloak. My head felt like it was stuffed with cotton instead of brain matter. There were a lot of things on my plate and I felt like I wasn't managing that plate very well. Bless her, Dianne said, "Kate, do you need to prioritize?" (☺)

And my week was mild compared to the experiences of some folks, even amidst our own congregation. I know every one of you have had difficult spaces in your life. Maybe you are in one right now. So what were you then (or are you now) thinking? Saying? Praying?

We tend to think of Jesus in the most beatific terms. But imagine what he might have been saying when he went to that lonely place: I'm tired. I don't want to do this anymore. Why me? I could use some relief. I'm afraid this task is more than I can handle. The problems are too big for me. What am I to do?

So what do you suppose he might have understood in the midst of that silence he had sought? Maybe that yes, you're tired. Of course you feel like you don't want to do this anymore and you could use some relief. You're afraid you can't handle it, feel the problems are too big for you.....then you have come to the right place.....here is where you find that relief, put those burdens down, recharge your batteries, heal your battered soul.

Jesus needed healing, too. But when he finds that renewal, then he prepares to hit the road again. The scripture tells us that Simon Peter and those with him pursue Jesus. Have you ever noticed that when you try to get some time alone, someone almost always finds you?? The Greek word used in this passage for pursue is a very strong one that usually conveys hostile intent. Simon apparently doesn't want Jesus to leave his, Simon's, hometown of Capernaum and perhaps thinks Jesus is losing valuable opportunities there. But Jesus is insistent that he must go to the next towns and preach there as well.

So there are at least a couple of lessons here for us: the more demands on us, the more difficulties we face, the more critical time apart from those demands and difficulties becomes; and it is incumbent upon us to make time for those "lonely places." Jesus never "happened" to find himself alone. He went out to put

a stout fence around some corner of time and space, as the Interpreter's Bible describes it. And so must we, if we are to face the various and sundry challenges life presents us.

Clearly, this is not a simple matter. It is hard to shut our doors against the insistent intrusions of the outer world.....the constant invaders of the space we seek to claim. We encounter those, who like Simon Peter, have other ideas about how we are choosing to use our time. But if we yearn for healing, long to be restored to our rightful place in life, then we make the opportunity to seek that restoration and renewal from the Source which is readily available and in ample supply if only we offer ourselves for healing, our spirits for revival.

"In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

Yes!.....Amen!