

February 4, 2024
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 40:21-1

Psalms 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In these still short, and mostly dark, days of February, with our senses confronted with social and political venom and violence, today's readings from Holy Scripture are a tonic for any who long for the brightness of God's face. They offer to us reminders of that brightness, both cosmic and domestic, universal and particular.

I spend a lot of time talking about discipleship, what God calls us to do: not only to shine a flashlight on God's handiwork in the world around us, but also to name and call out those unclean spirits that would rob us of life.

Today, however, the readings give us a chance to reflect on what God wants for us, what God desires to bring to us; to all of us: restoration and wholeness. Let's begin with the cosmic.

The prophet Isaiah delivers God's word to the people of Israel who are languishing, deteriorating, in exile. With vivid images, Isaiah reminds them that their God is a God who is bigger and more powerful than they can imagine, even more powerful than their enemies. "It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers."

Well, that sounds lovely. But if you're in a place of exile of any sort, it can be hard to hear. I can just imagine the Israelites refusing to be comforted, crossing their arms and shaking their heads like seven-year-olds: "but what about me? My way is hidden from the Lord. My right is disregarded by my God."

Then comes Isaiah's ringing response: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God." And that everlasting God's steadfast promise is to heal the broken hearted, and to bind up their wounds.

Even in the midst of a crisis, faced with a situation where they cannot see any positive outcome, Isaiah tells his exiled hearers to "wait for the Lord." For "those who wait for the LORD," even when things look hopeless, "shall renew their strength."

And so, we turn our attention from the cosmic images of God to a Sabbath day in the small Galilean town of Capernaum. We heard about the morning of this day last week, when Jesus healed a man who had an unclean spirit. In today's portion of the story, the synagogue

service is over, and Jesus heads to the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John in tow.

In just a few phrases, Mark tells us a story of Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. We hear that Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. The fever leaves her, restoring her to her rightful place in the household. And all of this, on the Sabbath.

Remember the first, urgent verse of Mark's gospel? "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Well, here we are, not even into the second chapter, and Mark is showing us that, in the restoration of health and wholeness, Jesus is the Good News in action.

One of the great delights I take from Mark's gospel, beyond the brisk pace, and the repetitive "immediately," is the ordinariness of things. Mark tells us that Simon has a mother-in-law... who is sick... and he's worried about her... and he asks Jesus for help. Simon is, in other words, ordinary. Like us.

And the Good News of her healing spreads rapidly among more ordinary folks. When the Sabbath ends at sundown, the whole town is gathered at the door of the house, and Jesus heals many people, restoring wholeness, and bringing saving health to individuals, to families, to the entire community. What a splendid day in Capernaum; everyone will sleep soundly.

Except, of course, Jesus, who gets up while it is still very dark and goes to a deserted place to pray. At some point, his prayer is disturbed by the disciples. I imagine they were breathless: "Everyone is searching for you." How did Jesus respond? 'We can't stay here, it's time to go.'

Can't you just hear the gears turning in Simon's head? "But, but...this makes no sense. We've got a good thing going right here. Everybody loves you." Who wouldn't want to hang on to this experience? We would. We have.

My colleague James Liggett¹ talks about the universal temptation that the church faces of trying to hire Jesus. Of assuming that Jesus has come for our convenience, or as one more resource for our program plans. When we yield to that temptation, we find, sooner or later, and despite our best efforts, that the nice house we built for him is empty, and that he has gone on to the next town.

You and I long for the brightness of God's face, the experience of God's grace and mercy every bit as much as the Israelites in exile, or the people of Capernaum. Our Christian story and experience is that that brightness, that grace and mercy, are personified in Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the Lenten collects will remind us that "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves." We need the gift that is God's grace. And we need to remember that the grace that

¹ The Rev. James Liggett is the retired Rector of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/that-same-grace-is-offered-to-us-epiphany-5-b-2012/>

God offers to us is the same grace that God offers to all. Our God is a God without boundaries, and we are just like all the other grasshoppers.

If we can't or won't see beyond ourselves, if we try to control or limit where Jesus goes or what Jesus does, if we try to pay him to keep up the good work, we will have missed the point entirely, and we will find ourselves languishing in the darkness of exile once more.

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Other than Jesus, perhaps the only person in Capernaum who really understood all of this on that day was Peter's mother-in-law. We don't know her name, but we do know, from her, the truth. It's simple. "He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them." She didn't try to put Jesus in the medicine cabinet or set him up in a shop down the street. She simply served the world that she knew in His Name. She knew that "waiting on the Lord" did not mean sitting on her hands.

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Jesus rose from prayer and told Simon and the rest that it was time to go. The people who were searching for Jesus were disappointed, and the Kingdom of God grew in power. You and I have been graced, in this place called Grace, with the message of that kingdom. It's what Paul called his commission, and that commission is now ours: a message of God's desire to restore humanity to wholeness, a message that is too powerful to keep to ourselves.

When we gather in the Parish Hall this morning for our Annual Meeting, we will have the opportunity to lift up and celebrate the many ways we have faithful to this commission in the past year. And there will be time for us to look into the future, to dream together about where God is coaxing us to stretch even further, both within these walls, and out there in the neighborhood.

The work can be invigorating – it can also be exhausting. As we celebrate the year just past, hold close what the Scriptures tell you God desires for you, and for all people: restoration and wholeness. It's what the Collect calls "the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us" in Jesus.

Seek comfort in the light and brightness of God's face. Then turn outward and shine that light of the Good News on those who surround you, near and far, praying always that God's saving health might extend unto earth's remotest end. Amen.