

Renewing Strength

Some weeks ago, as I was outlining possible sermon topics and worship themes for the first two months of the year, I was amused by the timing of the appearance of two passages at least partially about rest and renewal on the Sunday beginning my planned vacation. God really does have a sense of humor. But my own personal need for rest and renewal aside, I believe there are important lessons for all of us here. All of us live lives that are often too fast-paced, too filled with “musts” and “oughts,” too driven. All of us are called to engage in acts of ministry, in what our Jewish brothers and sisters call *Tikkun Olam*, “healing the world,” loving our neighbors as ourselves. All of us are called to recognize the power of God in our lives and in the world. And all of us are heirs to the promise that in God we will find the rest needed by our souls.

Have you ever read through the whole Gospel of Mark at one sitting? I encourage you to try it – it’s the shortest of the Gospels and I should think that it wouldn’t take anyone here more than an hour. If you should do this, one thing you may notice is the breathless, breakneck pace of Mark’s writing and of the hectic speed he seems to give to Jesus’ ministry. Just listen to the story so far in chapter one, starting with Jesus’ appearance in verse nine. As I read, listen especially for the “speed” words – “immediately,” “now,” “as soon as,” and so on.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various

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diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Do you get the sense of rushing here? It makes me tired just to read it. Jesus seems to be a man always on the move, always with more to do, always with more demands on his time than he can answer. But again and again in the Gospels, we find that at the height of the busy-ness, he stops. He goes off by himself and he seeks the presence of God.

One of the writers who publishes electronically on the lectionary every week whom I often find helpful is Robert Linthicum, director of Partners in Urban Transformation. Linthicum points out that Mark uses the story of Jesus' busy sojourn in Capernaum to show "the full scope of Jesus' ministry." According to Linthicum, there are four major categories that we find in this pericope and throughout the work of Jesus. They are "the calling of Israel's systems to accountability, confronting the demonic forces that drive these systems, liberating the people and proclaiming the gospel." Jesus proclaimed the Good News in the synagogue but in that his teaching was unlike that of the scribes, he was calling them to accountability, giving them a new standard of truth to which they would have to adhere. Jesus' calls for repentance and proclamation of the love of God for all people consistently put him up against the representatives of the religious system of his day, the scribes and the Pharisees and the priests of the Temple, as well as the temporal power of the Romans, for none of them recognize the ultimate power of the Loving Father whom Jesus has come to manifest. Jesus consistently confronts the evil that lurks behind these representatives of the religious and political systems, for that which is set against God's love is aligned with the darkness that God's creative power continues to roll back. These forces of anti-Creation are also the root cause of the maladies that Jesus cures, from demon possessions to fevers to death itself.

Incidentally, another commentator this week pointed out that in his career Jesus extended healing to three of the most despised, "unclean" categories of the unfortunate: lepers, the demon-possessed and mothers-in-law. I should probably state for the record here, all joking aside, that my relationship with my own mother-in-law is excellent.

But for all of the critical importance of Jesus' work, in Linthicum's view, the categories of his "doing" in his ministry -- the calling of systems to accountability, the confrontation of evil, the healing and setting free, the preaching of God's love -- the sum total of these does not equal the fullness of Jesus' ministry. "For," as Linthicum writes, "it is equally important to examine the *beingness* of Jesus as well as what he *does*." What Linthicum is referring to here is Jesus' understanding of his need to regularly seek the presence of God in order to be blessed by God for the work at hand. Jesus knew that his strength was unequal to his tasks unless he took time to nurture that relationship that was at the very core of his identity, that of the Beloved Son of the Loving Father. In times of solitude, quiet and prayer, Jesus poured out his heart to God and listened to what God had to say to him in reply. I have spoken in this place before of the Trinitarian concept of perichoresis, the great dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that it was in prayer that the incarnate Son reentered that dance and drew strength from the loving relationship that he found in its embrace. And because Jesus was fully human as well as fully God, he reminds us to be human *beings* not human *doings*.

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Jesus' life as related by Mark sounds hectic to me but there were certain rhythms to first century life that modern technology has made obsolete. I believe our lives, for the most part, are more fast-paced than anything Jesus would have experienced. The weather and the seasons and the natural rhythms of day had more impact on Jesus and his followers than on us. For them, there were times when they rested because it was too rainy or too hot or too cold or too dark to do anything else. We insulate ourselves in Gore-tex or cool off with air conditioning or light up the night with powerful electric lights and plunge on regardless. Calls on Jesus' attention could only be made by someone in physical hearing distance or with a hand-delivered letter. We are continually bombarded by demands from long-distance by e-mail and telephone, with cell phones that follow us wherever we go. (Have you ever been in a public restroom and heard the person in the next stall talking on the phone? Is there nothing some people won't interrupt to take a call?) The expectations of those who awaited Jesus' visit to their town, as his fame spread, could only be fulfilled within the parameters of how far a man can walk in a day. Many of us rush to and fro across far greater distances on a regular basis – some of us are expected to know the ins and outs of airports across the country intimately in order to fulfill the requirements of jobs or family connections. Our economy demands a 24-7 stoking; not only do we work through the night but for some there is no Sabbath of any length on any regular day. Even the retired folk in this congregation are busy, as you'll know if you've tried to track down any number of them on the phone on a given day.

Despite this level of extreme busy-ness, or perhaps because of it, we are still called, communally as the Body of Christ and individually as its members, to continue the work of Jesus that Robert Linthicum finds expressed in the first chapter of Mark. We, too, are to challenge the systems of our day, speaking truth to power whenever and wherever we have the opportunity. We, too, are called to make possible the healing of individuals and the Earth. We, too, are called to carry the Good News of God's love wherever we go. So as we share the mission of Jesus, we'd better share some of his wisdom, too. We'd better make time for our relationship with the Creator.

The thing is, we have real limitations on our strength and capabilities, you and I. I've grown very aware of my own limitations in recent weeks. I am extraordinarily grateful to you all for providing me with time off in my contract and for insisting that I take advantage of it. Y'all have probably figured out by now that I get cranky when I'm tired. But all of us have our limits; all of us have our weaknesses; all of us get tired. The prophet Isaiah had a pretty good idea of human frailty. "God looks down upon us from the throne," he wrote, "and sees us as grasshoppers." I haven't paid a lot of attention to grasshoppers in recent years but they hold a significant place in my memories of my Grandmother's house in Herculaneum, MO. When I was a little boy, left with plenty of time for solitary play and contemplation, they fascinated me. They were relatively easy to catch, because they could not fly. They were easy to examine, because of their relative size. And they were safe, because they didn't bite. I must have spent hours in her back yard watching them. Later, when I was a teenager, they were just an annoyance. In those days, any time we went to Grandma's house between March and November, it was my job to mow her lawn – not terribly big but with a steep hill in the back. In the summer, the grasshoppers would jump and whirl in numberless panic, getting in my clothes, my hair and (yech) my mouth. I hope God doesn't see us with the same aggravation with which I viewed grasshoppers then and I doubt that God sees us with the same wide-eyed wonder with which I saw grasshoppers as a little boy. Maybe God's attitude toward us is more like that of the wise old teacher to the child. Do

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you remember David Carradine's hit TV show from the early 70s, "Kung Fu"? He played a wandering Shaolin monk in the Wild West of America (which doesn't really bear careful analysis). There were younger actors who played his character Kwai Chang Caine as a boy in frequent flashbacks which showed his ethical, spiritual and physical training in the monastery. The older monks called him Grasshopper, as in "When you can take the pebble from my hand, Grasshopper, it will be time for you to leave." When I think of the older monks' amused tolerance of their young pupil's many errors and their continued attempts to help him become a good and wise man, I think I have a picture of God's view of his "Grasshoppers."

But if we are limited, God is limitless. He created and maintains the universe. "He does not faint or grow weary," Isaiah writes; "his understanding is unsearchable." I've recently started reading a blog called "The Sarcastic Lutheran" from the pastor of an emergent church in Colorado whom I met recently, Nadia Bolz-Weber, and she shared a great insight on God's "unsearchability." One of her flock, Bryan, a graduate student in statistics, noted "that a numbers set of say, 5 things, is searchable and you can sort it. Same with a set of say, 200 items; but an infinite set is unsearchable and unknowable. So God is unsearchable." And yet, this infinite, unknowable, unsearchable God continues to care for us and to make God's own power available to us. All we must do is to come to God, to seek God's face.

Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, named by *Ebony* magazine as one of the greatest black women preachers in America, has this to say on the subject: "Prayer is coming to God. Prayer is seeking God. Prayer is the appeal of the soul to God. Prayer is standing before God as "an empty pitcher before a full fountain." Prayer is connecting with God who is the power source. Prayer is opening ourselves up to God for nourishment, as the flowers and trees open up to their environment: the air, the sunlight, and the rain. Prayer is communing with God. It is living an intimate relationship with God, surrendering all that we are to all that God is, as Jesus did, who said, "The Father and I are one, the works that I do are not mine but the One who sent me." Not to pray is to be guilty of the incredible folly of ignoring the possibility of adding God to our limited resources. In prayer, Jesus sought the strength that only communion and fellowship with God could provide. If Jesus needed this in his life, what about you and me?"

Jesus must have been mindful of the promise of God spoken by Isaiah: "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Another blogging pastor, Steve Godfrey, caught my attention this week with an insight about eagles. "One of the remarkable capabilities of eagles," he wrote, "is the ability to soar *over* a roiling storm. Eagles sense when a storm is coming, they soar to a high point in the sky, and then when the storm winds come, they use the storm's wind to soar even higher, over the top of the storm itself. What a powerful metaphor for coping with loss, distress, and conflict in our lives. Don't get caught up in the storms of life. Set your wings and let the winds of turmoil cause your soul to soar." I would add to Steve Godfrey's illustration that we can only soar over the storm when we allow God to enter our lives and to guide our wings.

Of course, it's always hard to turn over control of our lives like that. We want to be in charge; we want to provide for ourselves. On Wednesday night in "Soup, Salad & Soul," we discussed the commandment against coveting. One of the truths we uncovered is that coveting has a lot to do with not trusting God to provide for us, for thinking we've got to go out and get what we

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think we need by any means necessary. That attitude is the root of the sin of covetousness, of looking at things that other have and saying, "I've got to have that." The same attitude can keep us from trusting God and making room in the rhythms of our life for God's healing touch. I can confess before you today, and I'll bet it's true for a lot of you as well, that I allow myself to get so busy, so worn out, because I start thinking of myself as irreplaceable. I've just got to be at work more hours a week – what would they do without me? I've just got to join one more committee – without me they'll never get anything done! Do you hear yourself or is it just me? I forget, we forget, that we are just the grasshoppers. It's God who hung the moon and the stars in the sky.

And so, my brothers and sisters, I'm going to follow the example of Jesus. I'm going to listen to the advice of my wife and my children and several of you. For the next two weeks, I'm going to rest, I'm going to play and I'm going to pray. And when I return from my vacation, I'm going to do my best to be sure I'm carving out enough time every day to seek the face of God. I'm going to ask you to ask me from time to time, how I'm doing in that regard. And I'm going to ask you right back. Because as it says in the bulletin, "every member a minister." All of us are called to be ministers one to another and to extend God's love into the world. And none of us can do it without seeking God's face, without allowing God to nourish our spirits, without letting God be God. But as we do those things, we have God's promise that we shall renew our strength, that we shall mount up with wings as eagles, that we shall run and not be weary, that we shall walk and not faint. May our prayer together be, "teach us Lord, teach us Lord to wait." Amen.