



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, February 4, 2018

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

DONNA WESSEL WALKER

Isaiah 40:21-31 | Psalm 147: 1-12, 21c | 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 | Mark 1:29-39

In the name of God, amen.

It is easy to feel tired, bored, and worn out right now. New Year's resolutions are no longer bright and shiny; if we're still trying to keep them, we realize now there's real work involved, and that work is frequently boring. The problems of the world seem and are big—too big for any one person, and maybe any one group of people. Every step forward seems thwarted by several more backwards; every word of truth spoken is dissected, dismissed, and disbelieved. Where do we go for strength? Where can we find the energy to keep on keeping on? How do we recharge? Is there a higher source we can tap into?

There were a lot of options available in the ancient world; like our society, ancient cities had a full panoply of religious options on offer.

- There were the straight-up idols made of gold, silver, or other precious materials. You could make one yourself or order one made in the image of your favorite god, and put it in your house so that your gods would be right there when you needed them. Isaiah ridiculed these idols in the passage just before the lesson we read this morning.
- But many ancient peoples knew that statues were not the real thing, and pointed to gods far beyond our world, so far beyond earth that they were indifferent to humans altogether, unless we could be used for sport, fun, or competition with other gods. The gods of Olympus or other distant seats of power did not offer reliable support to their followers; their fecklessness could lead their followers to attitudes of indifference or even nihilism: what difference does it make what I do? The gods or fates are just going to roll on regardless of me and everyone around me.
- More common in the Ancient Near East were the local gods, tied to a specific place and guarding a specific group of people. These were the tribal gods: our gods are on our side so if you visit our tribe, you'd better worship our god and do things our way.

Sound familiar?

It is against these idolatries that Isaiah thunders. Having demolished the material gods, Isaiah proclaims that the one true God is cosmic: having created it all, God is Lord of the universe; God commands and controls and cares for all. God's perspective is higher and wider than anything we can picture. Yes, we are indeed like grasshoppers in God's overview: small, frantically busy with our immediate concerns, unable to see beyond our own heads. That's true of us, uncomfortable as it is to admit it. But that does not mean we are insignificant: God is not indifferent to us because we are small. The Psalm tells us that God numbers the stars and calls them by name. Isaiah says that God calls us by name, and because God calls, no one is missing from God's hosts. God knows that we get tired, that we get bored, that we wear out; so God gives renewing strength to the powerless. God keeps us walking and running. It is God's power that Paul relied on in his tireless, endlessly changing ministry to all kinds of people.

God is beyond metal statues and tribal deities. God is indeed cosmic and has power over the universe and yet God cares for the weak and weary: that is the paradoxical truth about God that Jesus embodied and made manifest, as we have seen throughout these weeks of Epiphanytide, (10:00: and have sung in that marvelous hymn this morning). Jesus demonstrated his authority in teaching the Scriptures, in calling disciples, in controlling and commanding demons and in healing. I am struck by how intimate these demonstrations of power are: sure, the whole city is at the door, but each person bears their own burden and seeks their own healing.

Simon's mother-in-law is a case in point. In fact she is the prime example in this story, the epitome of what an encounter with Jesus is like. Her family and friends tell Jesus about her and he goes into the room where she's lying. He takes her by her hand. He calls her by name; we don't know her name but Jesus did.

Just as Jesus knows your name.

Just as Jesus takes you by the hand.

As Isaiah says, because God calls them by name, not one is missing. And because of the power of the Creator of the universe, each one's strength is renewed.

Simon's mother-in-law is freed of her fever; her strength is renewed. She gets up and does what she always does: she heads for the kitchen. I used to be really annoyed at this moment in the story—and it was so well known to the earliest Christian communities that this story is in all three synoptic Gospels. Every time I heard this story, I would think, “Really, guys? Really, Simon? You couldn't get up and do the serving yourself? What's wrong with you and those hulking friends of yours?”

But now I see this story differently. Maybe it was just that Simon's mother-in-law liked to be active and hated to have anyone else in her kitchen. You know the type. Maybe her getting up so quickly and getting to work so quickly was proof positive of her miraculous healing by Jesus' touch. But I think it's more than that: having been healed and raised up by Jesus, this woman is now called as a disciple to serve others. Just as she was an epitome in her healing, so now she is an epitome of discipleship in serving. The first recognized leaders in the church were called “servants,” the word that describes Simon's mother-in-law. And that is how Jesus described his own work, later in Mark's gospel: “...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” (Mark 10:45).

And Jesus does go on from Capernaum to serve others. After refreshing his own soul by early morning prayer, Jesus tells Simon, Andrew, James and John that he's not going back but is rather going on. He has healed people in Capernaum, and in the healing he has named and called disciples to serve there. He is going on to heal, and name, and call other hosts of people, and because he is great in strength and mighty in power, not one will be missing. Simon and these others are called to go with Jesus, to learn from him how to serve others. They'll start in the neighboring towns and go throughout Galilee; eventually they'll end up turning the world upside down.

So it begins, so let it continue. Jesus takes you by the hand; he calls your name. Jesus raises you up, and no matter what your weaknesses or diseases are, he gives you the strength to serve others. Whether in your kitchen or your neighborhood or in the larger world, “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like the eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Amen.