

# Sermon: Epiphany 5

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 4, 2018

Year B

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalms 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

Today's Jewish scriptures... remind me of Job... when God asked... *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth...* because here... the Holy One says... *Who is my equal... there is no limit to my wisdom... I count the number of the stars... and call them all by their names... I bring princes to naught... scarcely has their stem taken root... when I blow upon them... and the wind carries them off like stubble... I provide food for flocks and herds... and even for the ravens when they cry... I gather up the exiles of Israel... heal the brokenhearted... and bind up their wounds... I do not faint or grow weary... but give power to the faint... and strengthen the powerless... haven't you known... haven't you heard... hasn't it been your understanding from the beginning... that this... is how I work...*

And when I think about today's Epistle... about Paul being all things to all people... I feel a bit cynical... and I have sometimes thought that Paul is being disingenuous... is putting on airs... is maybe even manipulating people... one commentator even accused Paul of... *over-egging the pudding...* Paul claims to be several things... a Jew... one under the Law... one outside the Law... a free man... a slave... and weak... some of us spend a very long time... just figuring out who we are... our values... and what we want to be when we grow up... [raise hand]... I wonder... why Paul can't just proclaim the Gospel and let the chips fall where they may... but there is a reason he does it... and it relates to last week's Epistle...

Last week... Paul wrote about food offered to idols... he said... *we know that... no idol in the world really exists...* and that... *there is no God but One...* and while all of us possess knowledge... not everyone possesses this knowledge... so we could say that if those who believe in idols... saw Paul eating food offered to idols... it might affirm their

limited knowledge... and if those who know that there are no idols... saw Paul eating food offered to idols... it may cause doubt in their knowledge... so Paul says... *if meat is the problem... I won't eat any... I don't want to cause any of them to fall...* so in last week's reading then... as in today's... Paul meets people where they are... just as Jesus meets us where we are...

I had my own recent linguistic lesson... about limited knowledge... if you heard this morning's installment of Soundings... you heard Pastor Diane refer to Simon's mother-in-law as being *resurrected*... that caught my ear... and I wondered if she had mis-spoken... I waited until we were finished recording to ask... waited until we were in the elevator to ask... and she said *resurrected* was the right word... because the word... translated in the NRSV as "lifted her up"... is the word... "raised"... she was raised up... she was given new life... so the healing of Simon's mother-in-law... is the first resurrection story in the Gospel... and the verb "to raise up"... is also used in subsequent healing stories... with the paralytic in 2:9... the man with the withered hand in 3:3... when he raised up the daughter of the synagogue leader in 5:41... and with the boy possessed by an unclean spirit in 9:27...

And the Greek word that's used for what this woman did... that's translated here as serve... is the same word that Mark uses in chapter 1:13... when he says that after Jesus was tempted in the wilderness... the angels came to wait on him... the same Greek word... and it's *diakoneo*... from which we get the word Deacon... Pastor Cynthia Kittredge writes that Simon's mother-in-law becomes at once... both an icon of resurrection... and a paradigm of Christian ministry...

The disciples told Jesus that Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed... because they know he could help... they already trust him... because Jesus extends himself... he goes to what are considered unclean places... he is seen as defiling himself... but through his actions... he redefines purity laws... as we heard in the Psalm... God provides food for even unclean animals like the raven... and there is no place God won't

go to raise people up... to extend holiness... it's done for the sake of something greater... and remember... Jesus came not to be served... but to serve... so he took her hand and helped her up... he raised her to new life... and she began to wait on them... not in servitude... but in service... in mission... as Jesus did... as we do...

You see... Kittredge wrote... a debilitating fever is equivalent to death... if one cannot do what is human to do... to serve... to feed... to provide for... to be released from illness and restored to oneself means one can fulfill responsibilities to others... and so repairing the bonds of family... is a dimension of resurrection...

In today's Gospel... Jesus mirrors God's characteristics... what he does... is echoed in the words spoken by Isaiah... *he gives power to the faint... and strengthens the powerless...* and is echoed in the words of the Psalmist... *God heals the brokenhearted... and binds up their wounds...*

But Jesus is caught between wanting to remain anonymous... and being unable to do much else except preach and heal... Pastor Kittredge writes that the resurrection life that Jesus proclaims... here at the opening of Mark's Gospel... and which Christians experience in the world in which we live... is ambiguous and complicated... the verses that follow this story of resurrection suggest the enormity of the suffering in the words... *the whole city was gathered around the door...* and there's a toll that this ministry takes on Jesus... is beginning to take on Jesus... Mark's Gospel is honest about the opposition to... and the cost of... proclaiming this Good News...

So when it was dark... Jesus went off by himself to a deserted place to rest... to recharge... to reconnect... perhaps to sit in Centering Prayer... and they hunted for him... they said *everyone is searching for you...* and Jesus said... *let's move on... and go throughout Galilee...* Josephus records that there were upwards of 204 towns in that region... and I wonder who was disappointed that Jesus didn't return to Capernaum...

who didn't get what they wanted... who didn't see the spectacle of Jesus' ministry and think... *I'm next... I can't wait to get what I want too...*

But God is not a vending machine... and prayers are not quarters... yet we mostly pray for what we want God to give us... and not for what God wants us to have... we say *thy will be done*... but sometimes... we really mean... *my will be done*... because sometimes the job we want to be hired for... or the house we want to buy... or the relationship we want to be restored... may not be the best job or the best house or the best relationship for us... sometimes we need to make mid-course corrections... and let go of what we're holding on to... so we can take hold of the good that God wants us to have...

And while we talk about how God wants the best for all of us... we have to remember that when it comes to things like praying for a parking space near the mall entrance... or our favorite team winning... or getting just what we wanted for Christmas... God loves us so much... that what's important to us... is half as important to God... what's important to God are things like pursuing justice... and loving mercy... and walking in right relationship with God... God wants us to do what we can to visit those in prison... heal the sick... clothe and welcome the stranger... slake the thirsty... and feed the hungry...

And almost always... when we pray for healing... we pray for a cure... we sometimes conflate the two words... combine the two meanings... we want to believe that healing *means* being cured... and the human body is extraordinarily resilient... it's been designed to heal from within... though sometimes it needs some help from without... but it is also extraordinarily fragile... and sometimes... some dis-eases cannot be cured... and they remain either chronic... or become terminal... but we can always be healed... in baptism we have been born to new life... we live two lives at the same time... one here and one not here... so that even when this life ends... our life in Christ continues... so we can be restored to wholeness... and we will be resurrected...

And like Simon's mother-in-law... we are called to lives of service... to meet people where they are... to proclaim the Gospel... and ask ourselves... how do we respond to the many ways Jesus brings us back to new life... how do we walk humbly with God... and how do we understand giving and receiving... as being the very same thing...

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