

Renewed for Service
Isaiah 40: 21-31; Mark 1: 29-39

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 Has it not been told you from the beginning?
 Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
 and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
 who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 and spreads them like a tent to live in;
 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
 scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
 when he blows upon them, and they wither,
 and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
 To whom then will you compare me,
 or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?
 He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name;
 because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,
 ‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God’?
 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.
 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
 but 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.

According to the Farmers’ Almanac, yesterday, February 3rd, was exact halfway point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox; friends, we are in the middle of winter. I remember, living in New York City, February was hard, really hard. It was the point I would consider buying artificial light to lift my mood. The crisp fresh air and the bright-colored foliage of autumn had faded from memory, and the city that was bright with festive holiday lights had given way to grey slush of ice over dark asphalt streets. What made it harder, was that I knew that the warmer days were still months away, and I literally could not wait. I didn’t think I could last. I was weary.

Here in New Mexico, we know we will start to see the sign of spring soon enough, and even a terrible snowstorm leaves behind the gift of beautiful winter scenery that delights the eye. Yet, even for us here, it's been a rough winter. More of you have been snowed in more days than usual, including Sundays. We all know someone who have had a scare on the icy road, or had struggled with health, stubborn respiratory illness, long COVID, so draining.

On this day, in the middle of winter, the invitation of the Holy Spirit, our advocate, may be to acknowledge the weight of the season, and along with it, the weight of the living of these days, whatever it is you're going through right now, in the middle of winter. Gently, the Spirit invites us to feel if there is some heaviness in our hearts, that is weighing our spirit down. If you cannot feel it for yourself, if you don't want to go there, feel it for someone that you know who is carrying a burden, who is in despair and feeling down.

Because the good news of the words from the Book of Isaiah given to us today, is for those who are feeling weighed down, weary and exhausted.

As people of faith, we tell ourselves, and often each other that we are to be always strong, cheerful, grateful, too blessed to be stressed. We love our bootstraps, don't we? But as we just prayed in our prayer of confession, the Lord knows we are broken and hurting, deeply in need of healing. Sometimes our head or mind doesn't know it and wouldn't admit it until our body tells us.

It doesn't feel good or right to be so down and helpless; it doesn't feel acceptable. So, we pull up our bootstraps and put on a brave face. But God's people throughout the ages have felt this, and they cried out 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'? They felt that God didn't see their plight and God's justice escaped them.

The first hearers of this poem were the Israelites who had been taken captive in Babylon. Their life in exile was a painful reality, forced from their homes, scattered as the temple was laid to waste; they found themselves living as captives and refugees; they were the faint and powerless and saw even their youths grew weary and fell exhausted.

It is when we feel weak and powerless, too exhausted to go on our own, whether young or old, we become vulnerable and honest enough to truly experience the power and grace of a God who raises us up on eagle's wings; when we feel our energy drained and spirits low and all we can do is wait... and wait for what? Or who? For another earthly ruler? No, those that wait and hope for the Lord will be strengthened and renewed, and the poem reminds us that the Lord

God, the creator of the universe, is the ruler of all the nations who makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

This passage is about us, too, then, and about God and what God does with us, when we come ever so close to losing heart, when we dare turn our attention beyond our comfort zone, and see with our eyes and hearts wide open the suffering of our neighbors and the plight of all God's children living in fear and hungry, and we feel powerless.

Those who wait and hope in the God who created and sustains the world, the God who overturns the plans of the wicked rulers and other institutional powers of this world, also trust that this God will do, has done, and is doing the restorative and renewing work for God's children, young and old, in all the earth.

This poem reminds us, too, that faith begins with memory; it reminds us of what we forget when we're at a low place, which is that God is mindful of us and gives us strength, renewing and restoring. Like I, in the middle of winter in New York City, could not remember the beauty of the fall nor draw strength from the knowledge that the spring will return, we drown in our own misery, forgetting God created all of these wondrous things which we cannot even begin to grasp it, but we can trust that this God, who exists beyond our imagining, still cares for each one, calling them all by name.

What is weighing down your heart and soul on this day, in the middle of winter? Whether it is the violent world conflicts and the plight of the victims, or a loved one suffering closer home, or vulnerable members of our community, our city, it is the same God who knows them each by their name and cares for them, even though how God is at work in their lives maybe hidden from us.

Yet the purpose of God's power is to give strength to the faint and the weary. And when God has renewed our strength and refilled us with courage, we are sent out to lift up those who are weary, weak and fallen, and that's part of God's redemptive, saving work. And Jesus illustrates this perfectly and shows us how this is so, in today's Gospel passage. Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark 1: 29-39

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

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Today’s reading begins “**as soon as** they left the synagogue.” Remember what happened in the synagogue? We read last week, when it was Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue to teach, and people were amazed because he taught not like the scribes but as one with authority. **Right then** an unclean spirit living in a man rushes out at Jesus and Jesus tells him to come out of the man, and the unclean spirit obeyed, and the word about Jesus began to spread. Jesus’s first healing miracle.

So, **as soon as that was done**, Jesus went into the house of Simon and Andrew, and **right away** they tell Jesus that Simon’s mother-in-law is sick; she’s weak and in bed with a fever. Sounds as though all she could do was wait for help. And Jesus came, took her by the hand and lifted her up. She who was lying in bed powerless is given strength; faint no more, she got up and started to serve them.

At this point, you may think “poor woman; she was so sick, and Jesus just healed her, and she has to right away serve all these men who came into her house?” But the word “serve” used here is the same word as to “minister,” like the angels who “ministered” to Jesus in the wilderness after he was tempted. Simon’s mother-in-law had lost her strength. By Jesus, her strength was renewed, and it was renewed for service. That word “to minister” or “to serve” is “diakoneo” and is the root word for our word for Deacon, one ordained to the ministry of care. Simon’s mother-in-law was the first Deacon. This congregation used to have the board of deacons, too.

Then, that evening, Jesus healed so many people who had waited for him in hope, renewing their strength, giving power to the faint and casting out demons. Imagine, each one of those who were strengthened turned around and started to serving others? Kingdom of God is at hand, indeed!

At this point, he’s been teaching and healing and casting out demons for a whole day. He must be exhausted. Yet, instead of sleeping in, he gets up early the following morning to go to a

deserted place to pray. I wondered if Jesus, in his prayer, was waiting for God to renew his strength, so he can go on with his ministry.

So, Isaiah taught us “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,” and Jesus showed us, even when we are exhausted, the posture for waiting for God for the renewal of our strength is prayer. And we can pray not only for ourselves but also for those who are too deep in despair, too lost or too weak to pray. Above all, let us pray so as we follow Jesus, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint. Amen.