

## A Call To Our Creator – Jessica Ulrich

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

Here at St. Paul's we follow the Christian calendar, right, friends? Today we notice that it is the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. And this Season after Epiphany invites us to think about the goodness of God and of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. The texts for this week are wonderfully sharing with us just that: that Jesus Christ is the Lord. This morning's message is beckoning us to God as we continue to go about the work of the Gospel together, in this new community that Christ makes possible.

I have been greatly challenged in the last couple weeks as Dr. Smerick preached the Gospel which calls us to have courage and deny ourselves and our supremacy and/or power and to radically lay down our lives for "the other." I have also been reflecting a lot lately, in this season of despair I've been in for months, following the sudden death of my grandmother and death of my internship pastor, Debra Williams. I've witnessed families struggle to stay together. I have been studying and really realizing our nation's issue of mass incarceration and the New Jim Crow and of our mistreatment of Earth and resources. I've been listening to my friends' stories of hurt, and hearing the prayers and grief that our church is experiencing together. And I think to myself, "How in the world are we able to bear all these things? How can we keep moving forward? Where do we go from here?"

Now I do recognize that my suffering does not compare at all to that of Israel, or even to those living amongst us today... but in some ways, I think these might sound like questions of the Judeans in exile in Isaiah. Israel is suffering. They are oppressed. Everything they know has been taken away. Where can the hope come from? Where is restoration? Isaiah says to the people: *Have you not known? Have you not heard?* It is God who is Creator, who is the peace-bringer. It is God who numbers the stars and calls them by name. It is God who is strong and *does not faint or grow weary*. It is God who gives understanding and power to the powerless! It is God who renews strength! That same God will bring us to freedom. This is who our hope is in. Isaiah is recentering Israel and us to God.

And then again, this same thing is repeated beautifully in the Psalm we praise and sing. We are drawn into who God is: God's attributes, emotions, actions. God *builds*, strengthens, provides, makes declarations, *lifts up* the people, *heals the brokenhearted*. It also points us to the human partners in the story, who and what God delights in: the Lord *takes pleasure in those who fear him ... who hope in God's steadfast love*. But in these humans there is also weakness, and so God extends grace and compassion.

We learn of God's deep love and care for Israel, for the oppressed, brokenhearted and wounded. God is intimate and personal. But God also cares and loves the vast cosmos and all of creation. It is God who provides the nourishment and sustains the earth and all the creatures within it. God knows the number and names of the stars yet also knows the situation of the numerous outcasts of Israel. All of these things are depending on God. And so, if the people want to know how they will get through and who will provide, they look to God. Isaiah and the Psalms respond to the question, "Where do we go from here?" with, "You go to the God of Creation."

The Psalm and Isaiah were preparing us for the Gospel message in Mark where we see the SAME GOD (the God of Creation, healing, strength, wisdom, of hope) in Jesus Christ. Everywhere **he** is going, he is setting people free, restoring them back to life, healing the sick, strengthening the peoples.

And when he goes to Simon's mother-in-law, who was in bed with a fever, he revives her and heals her. She is restored and freed! ...and then this woman reveals to us how to be a follower of Christ. After Jesus comes to her in her sickness and frees her, she rises up and chooses to give of herself! The point here is not about WHO she served necessarily, but that right after she has been healed, rather than being selfish, she chose to be selfless.

In the words of Martin Luther, "Christians [followers of Christ] are both perfectly free, subject to none, and dutiful servants, subject to all."

Similarly to Simon's mother-in-law we see that same servanthood in Christ himself. Following the giving of himself both to the crowds and to the mother, he goes to pray. And following that, **Christ himself** returns to service.

There is a pattern: Simon's mother-in-law and Jesus are either suffering or amidst the suffering. They both meet God and are restored to life and to service. I believe our lives are in a pattern that is much the same... During the week, we gather up the sufferings of the people, of what we know of ourselves and of others. We breathe that in and it becomes a part of us...yet, when we gather together here...and when we come together in prayer as Jesus did, with every breath of "Lord, in your mercy" we exhale that pain we've been carrying for ourselves and on behalf of others...and are comforted by the family that is surrounding us, taking our prayers as their own, saying "Hear our prayer." We are brought forth from our sorrow, for we KNOW where to go and who to go to for healing and life: the very one the Psalms sing about. And when we breathe in, we breathe in the goodness of our God, the very breath of our God. And as Jesus raises us up from prayer, we do just the same, like Peter's mother-in-law, Paul, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and all the saints that have come before us...

We are recentered and renewed when we encounter God. We are then sent forth to give ourselves for the service of others. Here, in this community, we serve so that Christ, the Son of God, may be realized. So as we go out to do hard work, Gospel work, let us proclaim the goodness of God: that the same Creator God is the One in Christ Jesus.