

Worship for February 6, 2022

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship                Psalm 147

How good it is to sing praises to our God.

**For God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.**

God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.

**God is our Lord, and abundant in power.**

**God's understanding is beyond measure.**

\*Hymn 744    Arise, Your Light Is Come!

Call to Confession

Isaiah exclaims, "Have you not seen? Have you not heard? "The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary," but comes to us to renew our strength and restore us to right relationship with God and others.

Prayer

**O God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer, we confess our feelings of anxiety and uncertainty brought on by a continuing pandemic, extreme weather events, acts of senseless violence, and other threats. We look for help, but, sometimes it seems you are far away. Remind us that you are present to us, and to all your vulnerable children, to comfort and to bless in times of suffering and need. Renew our strength and restore our joy that we might mount up with wings like eagles to carry out each day's purpose. Amen.**

\*Hymn 698                Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Pardon

The God who fashioned the stars and the moon has come close to each of us with mercy and love. Hear the good news of the gospel: We are forgiven and freed to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. Know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Old Testament Reading                Isaiah 40:25-31

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading    Mark 1:29-39

The Morning Message

*"Have you not known? Have you not heard?"*

I always get a tingle up my arms when I hear those questions. It's like a cosmic, "Where have you been? Have you been living under a rock?"

Isaiah 40 begins what Bible scholars call Second Isaiah. This passage has been described as a pre-trial narrative containing a strong defense of God. This section precedes the "trial" of the next eight chapters of Isaiah, where humanity is "tried" as in a courtroom. In this pre-trial narrative, God is presented as the one who needs no introduction.

God is the master designer, creator of all that is, whose power and authority have no limits. The one who is the very definition of benevolence, who reaches out to the weak, faint, and powerless to renew, strengthen, and empower. God is the author of the natural world, rendering us awestruck at summer's rushing waterfalls that turn to hanging swords of ice by winter. Surely, we all know this. Surely, we can all bear witness to God's dominion in any courtroom.

Someone I love is a lawyer. Early in her career she appeared with a client before a judge. It was a deportation hearing. In a few moments, the court would surely separate a mother from her little children, maybe to never see each other again. The young lawyer stumbled for words, overwhelmed by the circumstances.

The judge swiftly chastised her, "*Young lady, are you an attorney?*" She squeaked out, "Yes, Your Honor." "*Then represent your client!*"

If *you* were to stand before the court, if *you* were to testify to the mighty acts of God, what would *you* say?

When this text appears in the lectionary, I always think of my friend, whose hyper-active adolescent son was to appear before the session with his confirmation class. This was the moment of truth, the hour when they could be questioned on what they had learned about church history and theology, the moment when someone would surely ask if you have to be baptized to get into heaven and why Presbyterians don't normally applaud in worship.

Unconvinced that his son was ready for this examination, dad took the boy to a nearby stadium and walked up and down, back and forth, all afternoon, quizzing him.

That night, washed and combed and dressed in their go-to-meeting clothes, the class was assembled before the session. One by one, the elders asked a question of the young people. With each question, my friend grew more nervous.

Finally, it was his son's turn. An elder of many years service looked at the boy and asked, "Young man, can Jesus do anything?"

It required only a one-word answer. "Yes."

Examination over.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?* Those who wait upon the Lord shall be filled with strength. They will stand before stern judges and not be rendered mute. They will be given uncommon endurance, even surpassing the fitness of young athletes. They will succeed in their work even when their mom or dad doubts them or enemies assail them.

In our gospel text, we are witnesses to the power Jesus wields over sickness and death. Fevers were common in Galilee. The Greek translation of the text indicates that the sick woman was seriously ill. She was near death. When Jesus ministered to her, she was healed immediately. That's a common theme in Mark: things happen immediately.

And after she was healed, she got up out of her bed and began to serve the people gathered in her home. Apparently, she didn't need six weeks to recuperate like I did following major surgery. If the neighbors came with casseroles and flowers, the Scriptures don't mention it.

No. She resumed her role and responsibilities right away- cooking, cleaning, serving.

I'm not advocating that any of us jump up out of a sick bed to make dinner for company. That misses the point.

God gives and gives and gives and does not grow tired or weary. One good deed, one life redeemed, one relationship restored- gathers steam. Strength builds upon strength. And, if we want to understand that kind of strength, we will find it by waiting upon the Lord.

That can be translated into waiting upon or serving or taking care of God's world and God's people. Peter's mother-in-law regained her strength in performing household tasks in service to Jesus and her family. But it can come through teaching and advocating and problem-solving, fixing the plumbing or patching the road. I remember times when the pediatrician's answering service was a gift from God. Service in God's realm is unlimited.

Oftentimes, we explain or rationalize healing stories in the Bible by qualifying them. We say things like disease was misunderstood, that the science that informs us today did not exist, so that is why these stories appear so dramatic.

A simple medication, like penicillin, would come along in time and save millions of lives. Simple practices, like wearing shoes, prevents the infestation of parasites entering the body through the soles of the feet. Parasites rob the body of nutrients and eventually cause death. Healing so often comes by way of human invention we might expect the stories of miraculous healing to cease.

But, the fact remains that Jesus was, and is, a healer, and that was one reason people were drawn to him. Fast-forward two millennia, and healing may well come by other means, rendering the witness of scripture a relic.

Or, does it?

Two years ago we heard reports of a disease that was about to sweep over the whole world. Little was known about it, but, it seemed no one was immune. First-world or the two-thirds world. No difference. The disease may be of little consequence or it could lead to a horrible death. The first time I heard of the coronavirus, Jessica, our secretary, was working with some Chinese students learning English on-line. These kids were traumatized by illness and isolation. Some were alone in their homes without their parents. I think Jessica served them as much by listening to the concerns of their hearts as helping them gain language skills.

Soon, in the US, there would be panicky trips to grocery stores to stock up on food and supplies. Paper and cleaning products were rationed. Schools and churches and restaurants closed. Vacations were cancelled and playgrounds were roped off. We all donned masks. We washed our hands til the skin was chapped and sore.

Life was turned upside-down. For once, I think Americans understood what it was like to be as vulnerable as our brothers and sisters in the world's most backward and impoverished places. It was a time of humility. We needed a dose of humility. It was a reckoning of sorts.

Conversation soon turned to finding a way to control the Coronavirus. We heard that scientists were working around the clock to develop a vaccine. There were starts and stops and angst and anxiety and accusations and all manner of shameful words and deeds in these many months.

Every evening we watched the news for a progress report. We still do. We had hope, and still do. Sadly, we witnessed the devastating effects of Covid, people who wouldn't benefit from the vaccine, but whose experience with the disease would advance our understanding.

Plagues and diseases and famines were commonplace in Bible times. Disease was often thought to be the result of anti-social or sinful behavior. People lived in fear of sickness and death.

Sometimes they turned to folk remedies. Folk medicine may or not be very effective and can be harmful.

One of my daughters works in the field of medical anthropology. A lot of that work involves understanding belief systems. She called me one day, so excited, because one of the survey questions in her current study was something like, “So, who taught you that Vicks Vapor Rub was effective on hemorrhoids?”

No kidding. One of her grandmothers advocated for Vicks on everything, from diaper rash to sore throats. Vicks could cure it.

So, before Vicks was invented, Jesus comes along and he heals this woman and the demon-possessed man and lepers and the lame. And what are we to make of them? Some say these accounts are metaphors to demonstrate the power and majesty of God.

Hmm...

A year ago, like many of you, I took my mother to the Saint Mary’s education campus to receive her second Covid vaccine. We waited in a long line of cars. It could have been hectic and impersonal. But, on that cold, cold day, those who waited on us were pleasant. I would go so far as to say they were cheerful. They were finding some pleasure in waiting upon the public. That went a long way to calm nerves. At least, in my mother’s case, I believe the gentle nature of the nurse who administered the shot reduced her pain.

As I inched my car through this set-up, one of a hundred cars in the lot, I thought of the paralyzed man that was lowered through the roof of a crowded house to be healed by Jesus. As I looked at the people in those vehicles, they were all in that early vulnerable class of recipients, I remembered Jesus telling long-suffering people to take up their mats and walk.

Immediately upon receiving her shot, my mother turned to me and said she hoped how soon I would be eligible to receive mine. That’s what happens when we understand that good things should happen to all people and not just to us or the right people or the deserving people. In God’s realm, blessings are lavished on all people. Unfortunately, my mother was diagnosed with Covid last week. On Thursday, she received the first of a series of antibody infusions that we hope will help her recover. We are thankful.

The healing presence and power of Jesus is not a metaphor. It is not a relic. It is just as real and effective as it was in Galilee so many years ago, even if it’s delivered by a clerk ringing up my giant bottles of vitamins, a pharmacist mixing my meds, or a masked nurse leaning into my car with a syringe full of life.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*

*The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.*

*God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*

*...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.*

*They will soar on wings like eagles,*

*they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.*

\*Hymn 761 Called As Partners In Christ's Service, verses 1 and 2

\*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p.35

\*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Holy and gracious God,

we give thanks for all the blessings of this life: for comfortable homes, nourishing food, medical care when we are sick; for work to do and strength and ability to do it; for the gift of good neighbors and the love of our families.

Loving God, fill those who suffer, struggle, or live in fear, with peace and reassurance.

Comfort those who weep, heal the broken and shattered, and welcome the lost.

Renew in us the joy of your salvation and restore in us a willing spirit.

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

\*Hymn 606 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

**Blessed are you, O God.**

**Through your goodness, we have been blessed with the gifts of time, talent, and treasure.**

**Use us, and what we have gathered, to strengthen your kingdom on earth and benefit those who have need in body, mind, or circumstance.**

**We offer our gifts through Jesus Christ, who died that we might live. Amen.**

\*Hymn 761 Called As Partners In Christ's Service, verses 3 and 4

\*Blessing

Go now, and follow Christ wherever he leads you.

By the grace of God, be all you have been called to be,  
and cast wide the net of God's love.

Remind one another of the good news, and hold fast to your saving faith.

In peace, go out to love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*Postlude