

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany B ~ February 7, 2021

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

C: Amen

Do you wish, as I sometimes do, that Jesus were still carrying out his public ministry of healing these days of COVID-19?

“The whole city was gathered around the door” of Simon and Andrew’s house (Mark 1:33). Jesus’ casting out of the demons which we considered last week, and his healing of Peter’s mother-in-law were magnetic in drawing the people of Capernaum to him.

And no wonder, since a fever that kept the First Century woman in her bed, without the means for a cure that we have today, likely would have killed her. The healing seemed so effortless: “He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.” (1:31a.) The Greek verb Mark used, *egeiro*, that our text translates as “lifted up” is the same one he often used in describing Jesus’ other healings (such as the boy who appeared to be dead after he had been freed of evil spirits, 9:27).

And it’s the same verb Mark put in the mouth of the young man in the tomb who described what had happened to Jesus when the women came seeking his body on Easter morning (16.6). There, the NRSV translates it as “raised up.” It “suggests that new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits or even death, so that they may again rise up to take their place in the world.” (Henrich, Sarah, Commentary on Mark 1:29-39, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>, 2012.)

And even more interesting is what happened after Jesus “lifted up” the woman. “Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” (1:31b). Once again, the Greek verb Mark used to describe the healed woman gives us insight: *diakoneo* (from which we get the title “deacon”) was also “the same verb Jesus uses to describe the essence of his own ministry in Mark 10:45.” (*Ibid.*) “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve... .” So Jesus restored the life force necessary for Peter’s mother-in-law to take up her vocation, her role of providing hospitality, and to be engaged in discipleship in this way. This is Jesus’ identity and authority: the service he enables brings a new life out of death.

So what does it mean to **us** to participate in the work of the realm of God on earth? How is God loose in **our** world today? Maybe in the guise of the medical workers caring for people with COVID, or caring for others so that they aren't stricken by the disease. Or the delivery drivers, the day care providers, the stockers, sackers and cashiers in the grocery stores and pharmacies, the cooks and waiters in restaurants. Remember the long list that we used to pray for each week? After several months, I thought that people were just waiting for us to get through them all, so I changed the prayer, but I thought that people would still have that long list in their minds, and I hoped we would lift up a silent prayer for each of the people who still were essentially serving us.

How is each one of us participating with God, day in and day out? It's a fine line between making ourselves available to others, and being good stewards of our bodies by isolating, distancing and masking ourselves, isn't it? There are times when we just are so tired of being alone that we want to get into a familiar activity with loved ones and friends – like watching the Super Bowl tonight.

Sometimes it's hard to make the call. But a simple, "Help me decide, dear God" prayer assists us in making the decision. And sometimes that short prayer gives us an alternative to the risky behavior we had contemplated. Maybe you can satisfy your urge for a Super Bowl party with snacks shared with your family and a visit to Grace's web site to make a donation to the Souper Bowl of Caring appeal to help others who have no snacks, or soup. After all, it's snowing, so why go out in it?

When we seek God's guidance in this way, we are waiting for the Lord, as Isaiah said. And we know what follows from there: we will renew our strength; we "shall mount up with wings like eagles, ... [we] shall run and not be weary, ... [we] shall walk and not faint." Isa. 40:31.

When we live in discipleship, we have a personal relationship with God. And God challenges us to relate: "[t]o whom then will you compare me? Well, in fact, God often makes such comparisons in scripture: God compared to a savior (Ps. 106:21, Isa. 49:26), to a potter (Isa. 64:8), to a warrior (Ex 15:3), to a shepherd (Ps. 23:1), to a woman in labor (Deut. 32:18), to a friend (Gen 15:6), to a helper (Ex 18:4; Ps 33:20), to a mother (Isa 66:13), to a lover (Isa 54:8), and so on.

Each of these images of God is consistent with a human being, like the human beings we are, created in God's image. We can know all these aspects of God (and develop an even closer relationship through that knowing) and still realize that the Holy One is without equal. For that reason, we can shout with the psalmist, "Hallelujah! How

good it is to sing praises to our God! How pleasant it is to honor God with praise! Ps 147:1.

And sometimes, we find ourselves needing to share that sheer joy in our relationship with God. We can do that like Paul did. He teaches,

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

1 Cor. 9:20-22.

We sometimes think that Paul here is saying that we should be dishonest, changing who we are, depending on who we are with. Instead, I think that he's suggesting that, in order to bring the Good News to people, we have to learn their language, their customs and their values so that we can present and explain the Gospel in terms that are understandable to someone who doesn't have the kind of relationship with God that we do.

So there's little point in our wishing that Jesus were still carrying out his public ministry in this time of COVID-19. Because he appointed us to do that as his disciples. He told us that "the one who believes in ... [him] will also do the works that ... [he] do[es] and, in fact, will do greater works than these... ." John 14:12..

Let's pray. Dear God, we ask your guidance to be faithful to the vocation to which you have called each one of us. We want to serve you, but sometimes we need your guidance and support to know how to serve dependably. Order our steps, dear Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C:Amen