**Weekend of Sunday, February 4, 2024**

**5th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 5/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31**

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:29-39**

**Sermon Title: *“Lifted Up and Healed to Serve”***

**Theme**

*In Isaiah the one God who sits above the earth and numbers the stars also strengthens the powerless. So in Jesus’ healing work we see the hand of the creator God, lifting up the sick woman to health and service (*diakonia*). Like Simon’s mother-in-law, we are lifted up and healed to serve. Following Jesus, we strengthen the powerless; like Jesus, we seek to renew our own strength in quiet times of prayer.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31**

*The Judeans in exile have a good reason to be hopeful: the one who will bring them to freedom is the God who created the world, the God who subdues the rulers of the earth and gives strength to those who are weary.*

 21Have 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?
 22It 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;
 23who brings princes to naught,
  and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

 24Scarcely 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.

 25To whom then will you compare me,
  or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
 26Lift 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.

 27Why do you say, O Jacob,
  and speak, O Israel,
 “My way is hidden from the Lord,
  and my right is disregarded by my God”?
 28Have 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.
 29He gives power to the faint,
  and strengthens the powerless.
 30Even youths will faint and be weary,
  and the young will fall exhausted;
 31but 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.

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

*God entrusted Paul with the responsibility of bringing the gospel to diverse people. Hence the focus of Paul’s ministry is not his own rights or privileges as an apostle but the privilege of serving God by freely sharing the good news of Christ with others.*

16If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.
 19For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20To 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. 21To 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. 22To 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. 23I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

**Gospel: Mark 1:29-39**

*Everywhere Jesus goes, many people expect him to set them free from oppression. Everywhere he goes, he heals people and sets them free. Disease, devils, and death are running for their lives. The forces that diminish human life are rendered powerless by Jesus.*

29As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.
 32That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34And 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.
 35In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” 38He 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.” 39And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

**Sermon**

Today, in a sermon I have entitled, *“Lifted Up and Healed to Serve,”* I take the position that the same God that Isaiah writes about, and who he claims to be is without equal and all-powerful, is the same God who is revealed in the divine Son, Jesus Christ of the Gospel Reading from Mark. And that same God revealed in Jesus Christ is also everlasting, meaning, he is still with us today with the power to heal, albeit in a different form, and with healing comes the call to serve. More on that as we go along.

The Book of Isaiah, a treasure trove of prophecies and revelations, is where we will begin today. Our Old Testament passage from Isaiah provides a powerful reminder of the transcendence and sovereignty of our Creator. In verses 21-22, we are confronted with the rhetorical question: 21“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” This poignant inquiry prompts us to reflect on the awe-inspiring nature of God's omnipotence.

As we navigate through the vivid imagery of Isaiah's words, envision the heavens stretched out like a curtain, and the earth as a mere speck in the grandeur of divine creation. In verse 26, we are beckoned to lift our eyes to the heavens, where the stars are numbered and called by name. This celestial choreography serves as a testament to God's intimate involvement in the intricate details of our lives.

Moving forward, verse 31 unveils a profound truth — the inexhaustible well of strength that God offers to those who trust in Him. Isaiah further declares,

31“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.

This promise becomes the bedrock of my sermon, setting the stage for our exploration of our Gospel Reading from Mark.

In the Gospel according to Mark, we encounter a narrative that unfolds with both urgency and purpose. Shortly after Jesus astounded the citizens of Capernaum with his teaching, and amazed them by healing a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue, we witness Jesus entering the home of Simon Peter where with just the touch of his hand he lifts Peter's mother-in-law from the grip of fever. The *immediacy* of Jesus' response teaches us the importance of compassion and the transformative power of divine intervention in our lives.

I know this is serious stuff but the mention of a fever reminds me of the sign at the Boardman Hot Dog Shoppe. What do you give a hot dog that has a fever? Chili sauce!

Just last week, a man called me with the saddest story and asked for assistance. I heard him and was moved with compassion and dropped what I was doing and met him at the Mahoning Avenue Library where I gave him a prepaid gift card to satisfy his need. He went on and on about how much he appreciated it and reached out his hand. I took his hand but didn’t let go right away – you see he was still talking. I think I made him feel a little uncomfortable holding his hand like that, but when he was finally done talking, I took both of his hands and said, I am going to pray for your situation right here and now. And so I did, right there in the library's parking lot.

I tell you that story not to lift up myself as your example, but to point to Jesus as our example. When we are made aware of a need, if possible, we should respond to that need with immediacy and compassion. And I did it with confidence that God heard my prayer and is going to continue to meet this man’s needs. And I further hope, his faith in that same God is encouraged by my simple gesture done on your behalf.

To the issue of *immediacy*, last Thursday afternoon, I visited Cheryl Updegraff, and upon being moved with compassion for her and her family, as soon as I got back to the church, I *immediately* wrote a prayer request asking you to pray for her *now, and often*. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we had this gospel text this week.

Remember, in the timeline of Jesus’ life, he was baptized, tempted, and then began calling disciples, and then in last week’s Gospel Reading, healed the man in the synagogue afflicted with an unclean spirit. Mark concluded that passage by writing, *28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

The story continues in this week’s reading, with Jesus healing Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, and then just about everyone in the city who had an ailment. Mark gives us the impression that Jesus's ministry will be marked by healing and restoration, and indeed it will be. But Jesus’s mission was about so much more.

I think we might think the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, and then the healing of “many” is the climax of this passage, but wait, there’s more! Amid the clamor of the crowd, the story after the climax eclipses the climax, in my opinion!

Jesus withdraws to a solitary place for prayer. Amid his demanding ministry, Jesus exemplifies the necessity of solitude and communion with His Heavenly Father. This act of retreat underscores the importance of nurturing our spiritual well-being and finding strength through prayer.

Isaiah's soaring imagery of eagles and the promise of renewed strength finds resonance in Jesus' healing ministry. The healing touch of Christ not only restores physical well-being but also serves as a metaphor for the renewal and liberation that come from a relationship with the divine. Moreover, the rhythm, where Jesus retreats to a solitary place, echoes the call in Isaiah 40:31 to wait on the Lord.

In our fast-paced lives, marked by constant demands and challenges, finding moments of solitude becomes imperative. It is in these quiet moments of communion with God that we, too, can experience the renewal of our strength and a deepening of our spiritual connection.

As we ponder these two readings, let us consider practical applications that can foster a renewed sense of strength and purpose:

Just as Jesus withdrew to a solitary place for prayer, let us prioritize moments of quiet communion with God. In the stillness of prayer, we open ourselves to the transformative power of divine presence. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, February 14. How about planning to be more devoted this Lent through prayer and meditation.

I have a question for you. Were you just a little disappointed with the ending of the Gospel Reading? Mark writes that the following morning, “everyone” was searching for him. Simon Peter and his companions “hunted” for him. That word translated as “hunted” is *katedioxen* and it means emphatically searching for, or chasing. English translators did their best when they chose the word, “hunting” and I think that is pretty close to capturing the disciple’s emotion.

Why do I say that? Because on that morning following an evening of miraculous healings, the word is out and even more people who need his touch show up, and no doubt some gawkers eager to see miracles performed. They came to Simon Peter’s home! What is he supposed to do with the growing crowd? And so the disciples “hunt” for Jesus. And when they find him, they try to compel him to continue his work in Capernaum. “Lord, there are so many people here who need what only you can give them!”

And yet, to their disappointment, and maybe ours too, Jesus’ response to being “hunted” is,

“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.” 39And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

You see, I think this is the true climax of the story, and I will tell you why.

Jesus and his four disciples are in Capernaum, Simon Peter’s hometown. Peter and maybe the others, want to keep Jesus in Capernaum to continue or maybe even finish his work. Who doesn’t want that kind of goodness for their own hometown?

But Jesus knows his mission well, and nothing can keep him from it, not even Simon Peter, a son of the city of Capernaum.

Jesus had done all he *needed* to do in Capernaum. Because of his ministry to them, the people *had* come to faith in him. As I am fond of saying, His mission was preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles. His performing signs and miracles were pretty obvious. But he also taught them to put their faith in God revealed in himself. That is his mission. He’s done here. It’s time to move on. He will not be their personal rabbit’s foot, something they can pull out when they need him and put back when they don’t. Faith in him as the revelation of their heavenly father is the mission, and he will be with them wherever they are forever.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Jesus' healing ministry demonstrates the importance of compassion in our interactions. But we too are not to remain stuck. We are to navigate our communities, workplaces, and families, embodying Christ's compassion by extending a healing touch to those burdened by physical, emotional, or spiritual ailments. But we can’t get stuck there. There are others who need what we, as his disciples, can give them. Jesus didn’t heal all the people in Capernaum. That wasn’t his primary mission. We don’t have to take on that burden either.

We can take one final lesson from early on in this passage, which is the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. Jesus “took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

While the feminists among us might be offended, this is not a story of patriarchy or misogyny. It was a different time and a different culture. Having been healed, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law began to serve, as was her role.

What we can learn from this part of the passage is, that once we find healing, or we help others find healing, we have to get up, and get back to the mission of telling others that the kingdom of God has come near in the person of Jesus Christ – our Lord. Freed from what holds us down, and keeps us stuck, it is time to get up and begin serving God again in whatever way we are called.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? We worship a God who is without equal, all-powerful, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is the same God who is revealed in the divine Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**Prayer**

Creator of all that is, we are humbled that you are interested in the smallest facets of our lives. We thank you for the example of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray that by his example, we can bring hope and healing and good news to those we encounter by the way we live our lives. Make us agents of his Gospel. We pray this in his name. Amen