

5th Sunday in Epiphany
(Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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

Isaiah 40:21-31. One of the most poetic and profound chapters in the Bible – the 40th chapter of Isaiah – ends with a powerful statement about the God at work in our world who “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” so that we can undoubtedly place our hope in this God. That closing passage, which is our Old Testament lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Epiphany, begins with four questions.

“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” (40:21-24).

Isaiah 40 is written to the Israelites in exile in Babylon. They have given up all hope that they will someday be liberated from their captivity and restored to their Promised Land. It is at this precise time, when they are in the depths of despair as a people and as individuals that Yahweh (“He who causes to be what is caused to be”) speaks to them through four questions: “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?”

Learn from your own history as a nation and as a people, God is saying to the exiles through the prophet. Learn from your entire understanding of how this world was created and by whom and for what (Genesis 1-2). Remember, recall, and then reflect on your history and on creation – and from that reflection, learn what God is doing in the world and how you are an integral part of that work of His.

Isaiah 40:22-24 first presents God as the God of history. He it is who shapes history. A city like Babylon that looks so immense when you are in it is, in reality, of small construction when viewed from a mountaintop. People who swarm around you are like grasshoppers when seen from afar. It is God who raises princes to power. And it is God who brings them to naught. Those kings and emperors, seemingly so powerful, are blown away and wither scarcely after they have been planted in power, for what may seem as a long reign (perhaps 40 years) is as an hour in the history of humankind and to God only a second of time. God is the creator of the affairs of humanity and is therefore the creator of history. He is the God who causes to be what is caused to be!

But the text continues:

“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” (40:25-26).

God is not only the creator of our history. He is the creator of nature, as well. Step outside on a dark night and examine the multitude of stars and planets overhead. Who created these? Did your actions or even the actions of any age's greatest king create them? No action of humanity is capable of creating them. All of nature has been created by God – the earth upon which we live, the sea upon which we sail, the air that we breathe, the mountains that surround us, the cosmos overhead. All have been created by the Word of God. Their very existence proclaims the strength and power of their Creator. Your God is “He who causes to be what is caused to be”.

Then Isaiah's prophecy concludes:

“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” (40:27-31).

You declare in your depression, “God does not care what happens to us” or “God will not intervene on our behalf”. Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds? Your God, the God of Israel, is the creator of all human history. Your God, the God of Israel, is the creator of the cosmos itself. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” The prophet returns to the questions with which he began this prophecy. Have you forgotten who you are because you have forgotten Whose you are? Have you allowed your troubles, your political powerlessness, your economic dependence upon Babylon to cause you to forget? Do you not remember that Yahweh gives power precisely to the faithful, and that he precisely strengthens the powerless? Place your trust in him as an exiled people and as captive individuals – and you will find that God will renew your strength so that you can overcome the difficulty you are in and become a people liberated from bondage by your God. Remember that He did it before! And He can do it again! And how do you know that? Precisely because his name is “Yahweh” – “He who causes to be what is caused to be”!

What Isaiah is seeking to communicate to the despairing Jewish exiles in Babylonian captivity is that God has not abandoned them. Rather, he is even now at work to extend both liberation (freedom from exile) and salvation (transformation into God's people) to them. The God of Israel is the God of creation – the creator of the cosmos and the creator of history. It is He, finally, who directs the world's affairs. And therefore, God will bring freedom to those to whom God intends to bring freedom. And at this point in history when this prophecy is written, that means God will bring freedom to Israel!

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c: (see Cycles A, B and C for the Second Sunday in Christmastide for a commentary on this psalm.)

Mark 1:29-39. This is a rather intriguing passage of scripture. What the author of this gospel is seeking to do through this scripture and the story that immediately precedes it (1:21-28) is that through the vehicle of a 24-hour span of time, he is painting in microcosm a picture of the ministry of Jesus. The story begins on the Sabbath (1:21) with the healing of a man with an unclean spirit (1:21-28) and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), goes through sundown (and thus, the close of that Sabbath day) so that the multitude can be healed (1:32-34), and on into the early morning of the next day where Jesus initiates a preaching tour of Galilee (1:35-39). Thus, Jesus' work covers a 24-hour period from sun-up on the Sabbath to sun-up the day following the Sabbath.

What is it that Jesus is telling us about the nature of Jesus' ministry through this literary device of a 24-hour day? Mark is telling us that Jesus' ministry consisted of four primary elements, as follows:

1. *Calling Systems to Accountability.* A strategic element throughout Jesus' ministry was that of calling the political, economic and religious systems of Israel to accountability. Jesus' attendance at the Sabbath worship at the Capernaum synagogue (1:21-22, 27-28), his usurping of the leadership of that worship, and his teaching of those attending that worship "with authority" are all symptomatic of Jesus' intent to deal with the structures of power in Israel.¹ The synagogue was one of the two primary institutions of religious power in Israel that also helped shape the political and economic priorities of the nation. Jesus' ministry began with an effort to call Israel's systems back to the practice of a politics of justice, an economics of equitable distribution of wealth for the elimination of poverty and a religion fostering a dynamic relationship between every Jew and God (e.g., Lk. 4:16-19). When it became clear that the systems would reject Jesus' invitation to embrace God's intentions for them, then Jesus increasingly became publicly critical of them, exposing their hypocrisy (e.g., Mt. 23:1-36). With the inclusion of this story in Jesus' "workday", Mark is making clear that calling the Jewish systems to accountability was an integral part of Jesus' ministry.

2. *Confronting the Principalities and Powers.* An essential insight of New Testament Christianity was the recognition that systems didn't become corrupt simply on their own. Although they had more than their share of lust for power, greed and domination, systems were also the abode of demonic power. That is, each system had its own interior spirituality that often became oppressive, dark, and even irredeemably evil. And it was that interior spirituality that gave to each system such immense power. That fact is captured in the story of Jesus' confrontation of the synagogue man who had a demonic spirit (1:23-26). In this story, Jesus confronts that spirit of the synagogue that had lodged in that man, battled it when it sought to gain control of Jesus, took control of it instead, and banished it from that man.² Thus, using the device of a "typical" day in the ministry of Jesus, Mark indicates that an essential part of the ministry of Jesus was not only calling the nation's systems to accountability and working for their transformation. It was also exposing the spiritual darkness that lay behind the disobedience of those systems and banishing that darkness. Thus, Jesus' ministry consisted not only of systemic warfare, but of spiritual warfare, as well.

¹ For a thorough exegesis of Mark 1:21-28, please study the exposition of that passage for the Fourth Sunday in Epiphany.

² Ibid.

3. Liberating People. But Jesus ministry also consisted of warfare on behalf of and for the freeing of people. Today's gospel lesson tells of Jesus' healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law and of the healing of multitudes of the people³ It is easy to conclude that 1:29-34 is simply about the healing of the sick. But it should be noted that Mark specifically notes that those brought to Jesus consisted of two groups of people: "all who were sick *or* possessed with demons" (1:32). The first were those who were physically ill (Mark notes later in this passage "with various diseases" – 1:34). But there were also those who were "possessed with demons" (1:32, 34). What did that mean?

We think of "demon possession" today as being a synonym for mental illness. But that is to minimize the biblical concept of demonic possession. As we established earlier in point 2 above and in the exegesis of Mark 1:21-28 found in the Gospel Lectionary for the Fourth Sunday in Epiphany, the "demon" with which the synagogue man was possessed was his complete surrender to the domination of the "synagogue system" over his life. In other words, he had "sold out" to the system. And the consequence of his "selling out" was that he had now come to be possessed by the standards and priorities of that system. Thus he had been captured by a lust to control (seen in his futile attempt to gain control over Jesus), acting unjustly (seeking to keep Jesus from the people), and seeking to undermine God's plans for the salvation and transformation of the people (exposing who Jesus truly was in order to gain the ascendancy over him). The demoniac had become a tool of the systems and their commitment to oppress, exploit and control the people. *That* is what the Bible means by demonic possession.

Therefore, when Mark wrote that the people brought both the sick and the demon-possessed to Jesus, what every Jew would clearly understand that he was saying was that Jesus had come to liberate the people both from their physical sickness, and from their succumbing to the domination of their current economic, political and religious systems (that is, being possessed by the principalities and powers of those systems). This premise is reinforced by Mark's careful description of what it was that Jesus actually did when he "healed" people from either their sicknesses or their demonic possession. In describing Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law, Mark states, "(Jesus) came and took her by the hand and lifted her up" (1:31a). This terminology is used repeatedly in Mark to describe what Jesus did for people (cf. Mark 5:31; 9:27). Jesus "touched" those who were possessed either with physical difficulties or had compromised with that day's political, economic and/or religious systems. That is, Jesus broke through to these people, captured their attention, connected with them at the core of their being, and poured his transforming power into them so that they might be "healed" of that which dominated or oppressed them. Then, Jesus "lifted them up" – took hold of them and lifted them up so that they could stand on their own two feet and look even God in the eye! Jesus freed them from whatever

³ It is intriguing to note that, like the healing of the demoniac in the synagogue, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law while it was still the Sabbath. However, Mark is also very careful to point out, "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons" (1:32). Sundown would mark the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the next day (Jewish days ran from sunset to sunset). In other words, Mark wants the reader to see that, by-and-large, Jesus obeyed the particulars of the Law, healing the vast majority of the people when it was not the Sabbath. But he would not allow such minutia of the Law to stand in the way of urgent or overwhelming human need that required immediate attention; the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath!

evil possessed them, and thus they became transformed and liberated people. They had been “saved”.⁴

4. Proclaiming the Gospel. The final element of Jesus’ ministry was that of proclaiming the Gospel (1:35-39). Thus, Jesus says to the disciples in this passage of his “typical” day, “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.” So, Mark concludes, “he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (1:38-39). Thus, an essential element in the ministry of Jesus was his proclamation of the gospel. But what was it that he actually proclaimed?

According to Mark 1:14-15, Jesus came proclaiming “the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the gospel”.” The word in Greek that is translated “good news” is the word “gospel”, so both English words are interchangeable. What is this gospel that Jesus was proclaiming?

The word “gospel” is a familiar word to Christians today, one we would define as “the message concerning Christ, the kingdom of God and salvation.” But that was not its meaning when Jesus first chose to use it. The word “gospel” was a technical term for “news of victory” (as, for example, regarding the outcome of a war; if you were on the winning side, then the news brought to you that the war was won by your side was “gospel” – “good news”). Its most precise usage was as the technical word for the ascension to power of a new ruler of a nation – in particular, for a new Roman emperor. This was what associated the use of the word with “good news”, for the “gospel” was the broadcast of the crowning of a new Roman emperor that, presumably, was “good news” to the Roman world.

Therefore, for Jesus to proclaim “the gospel of God” was for him to announce the coming of a new kingdom – the kingdom of God – that will be created by an “anointed” leader, who is Jesus, himself. Thus, what Mark tells us that Jesus is proclaiming both in 1:35-39 and throughout his gospel, is the great news (to the poor and powerless) and alarming news (to the powerful and comfortable) that God is about the building of an alternative kingdom through the One sent from God – Jesus of Nazareth. This gospel is of that One whose involvement in public life seeks to re-create all other kingdoms (whether they be Roman, Hellenist or Jewish) into society as God intended it to be.

There is one other element that is powerfully developed in today’s Gospel lesson. Through the vehicle of a single day’s activity, Mark has sought to demonstrate the full scope of Jesus’ public ministry. That ministry includes the calling of Israel’s systems to accountability, confronting the demonic forces that drive these systems, liberating the people and proclaiming the gospel. This is what Jesus *does!* But it does not quite describe the fullness of Jesus’ ministry. For it is equally important to examine the *beingness* of Jesus as well as what he *does*. And in this scripture, Mark takes note of that *beingness* in Jesus, as well as his actions.

The text tells us, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (1:35). Jesus took time to be alone with God. He took time for his own spiritual formation and the nurturing of his relationship with God. In the midst of

⁴ The Hebrew word for “to save” is also the Hebrew word for “to heal”. To heal is to save. To save is to heal!

what is described as a very intense day and a very busy life, Jesus takes time to nurture himself and to be blessed by God. This time of reflection, of prayer, of quietness, of solitude is what equips him for action. He cannot effectively undertake the ministries of calling systems to accountability, confronting principalities and powers, defeating the demons of society that capture us, liberating the people and proclaiming the good news of the coming of God's kingdom unless he spends time in prayer. Reflection is always necessary for action to become increasingly substantive. And action is necessary for reflection to become increasingly profound! Jesus knew this secret of personal sustenance and used it throughout his ministry to enable himself to re-create the world around him.

That was the essential work in which Jesus was involved. In the Isaiah 40 lesson for today, the prophet declared to captive exiles that the God whom they worshipped had not abandoned them but instead was about to extend salvation and liberation to them. God could do this because Yahweh was the creator of the cosmos, the shaper of history. And because God directed the world's affairs, God could and would be at work in their situation and would both liberate them from Babylon's domination and return them to their Promised Land.

Now, with the coming of Jesus to call, to confront, to liberate and to proclaim gospel news, God was again in the business of building a new creation. Through Jesus, God was re-creating human society into society as God intended it to be – a society of kingdoms committed to justice, to the elimination of poverty, to the sharing of wealth, and to leading all humanity into vital relationships with God. The re-creation of the world had now begun, and it had begun through the work, the life and the beingness of Jesus!

I Corinthians 9:16-23. Paul the Apostle presents in the Epistle Lesson of this lectionary his evangelistic strategy. It is an intriguing strategy, because it is built around the concept that one must be won to Christ on his own grounds. What Paul, in essence, states is that as the gospel is about One who came to minister to others by liberating and empowering others incarnationally, so the Christian is called to evangelize others by starting where they are and working with them at the point of their own identification of their issues, needs, hopes or dreams.

Salvation, Paul contends, is a free gift. Therefore, I have nothing in myself to take the credit for my redemption. God has simply chosen to save me through the actions of Christ, and so I am saved. Likewise, I can't boast about the effectiveness of my preaching because I am compelled by God to preach the gospel. My only ground for boasting, Paul concludes, is not that I preach the gospel, for I have no real choice because of God's irresistible grace. My only real boast is that I don't charge for my preaching, but earn my own way through the making and repairing of tents (9:16-18).

How am I to then carry out the evangelistic compulsion that God has placed so deeply in me? Paul's answer provides for us an essential principle for ministry, whatever that ministry might be (whether it is preaching the gospel, calling systems to accountability, confronting powers of darkness or working for the liberation of people). He states,

“Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 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” (9:19-22).

Here is the secret of Paul’s power as a Christian and as an apostle. He evangelizes by entering the world of the one he is seeking to reach and, without sacrificing any of his personal convictions or scruples, becomes as much like the people with whom he is seeking to minister in order to reach them. Thus, when with Jews, Paul would conform to the Old Testament ceremonial regulations even though he knew that these matters were not essential to a right relationship with God. On the other hand, when he was with Gentiles, Paul would be willing to live like them (without committing their sins), recognizing that he was never free to disobey God. When working with the powerless, he would divest himself of the power of his Roman citizenship so that he would risk what they would risk in embracing Christ. In whatever circumstance in which he would find himself, Paul confesses, he would “become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some”!

This is the essential principle of incarnational ministry. This is the essential principle of how to enable people to empower themselves. This is what Jesus did in becoming like us and working to call systems to accountability, to confront, to liberate and to redeem. He became in all things like us (except for sin), “so that I might by all means save some”. This is how to join with God in the re-creation of the world and the re-making of history. There is no other way.

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