

SUNDAY 7TH FEBRUARY 2021

REVD ALAN F. MILLER

CALL TO WORSHIP

Have we not known? Have we not heard?

Has it not been told to us since the beginning?

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.

HYMN Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult

PRAYER

Gracious God, you call us to follow Christ
and spread the good news of your love for all people.

Help us to become all things to all people
that we might reach many with your good news. **Amen.**

Psalm 147: 1-12

Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

The LORD builds up Jerusalem;

he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

He heals the broken-hearted,

and binds up their wounds.

He determines the number of the stars;

he gives to all of them their names.

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;

his understanding is beyond measure.

The LORD lifts up the down-rodde;

he casts the wicked to the ground.

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;

make melody to our God on the lyre.

He covers the heavens with clouds,

prepares rain for the earth,

makes grass grow on the hills.

He gives to the animals their food,

and to the young ravens when they cry.

His delight is not in the strength of the horse,

nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;

but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,

in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!

Praise your God, O Zion!

CONFESSION

We fool ourselves if we think
that our ways are hidden from God.
Therefore let us confess our sin,
trusting in the mercy of God our Maker.

God, you are everlasting,
the creator of all that is.
Your understanding is beyond measure.
We confess to you that we have
sinned against you and our neighbours.
In your compassion, forgive us,
for we place our hope in your steadfast love.

Praise the Lord!
Our God heals the broken-hearted
and binds up our wounds.
God takes pleasure in those
who place their trust in God's grace.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And 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. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He 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." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

REFLECTION

*Holy God, speak to us
what has been told from the beginning,
your Word that is the foundation of the world. Amen.*

Today we pick up the story where we left off last week – Jesus teaches with authority and then heals a man spirit exercising his divine power to restore someone to health and wholeness so that he can resume his place in the mainstream of community life. In so doing Jesus displays the power within him from God to heal, to restore and to overcome the forces of evil that constrain human life.

We now find Jesus with his disciples going to the house of Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew, and there he heals Simon's mother in law, responding with compassion to her physical infirmity. Taking her by the hand he raises her from her bed – and her fever is cured, her health is restored, and she is able to serve Jesus and his disciples, as befits her status as the senior woman in the household.

The fact that she was seriously ill in bed with a fever meant that Peter's mother in law was, in accordance with the standards of the time, deprived of the honour of offering hospitality. When Jesus heals her, he not only puts an end to her physical suffering, he also restores her to her rightful position. From a 21st century perspective we might baulk at the idea that her greatest honour might be to serve the male guests who arrive, but we always have to approach the gospel stories within the context of their own time and place. What the story tells us is that what Jesus does is to make people well and to make them whole, physically, spiritually, and socially.

What is further significant is that in doing so, Jesus shows that God's power to heal is not constrained by human rules and expectations. He breaks two important taboos – first, by touching a woman to whom he was not related, and secondly, by performing the healing on the Sabbath. Both in Simon Peter's house, as in the synagogue before, Jesus shows that where there is human need, God responds with love and compassion.

Mark tells us not only that Jesus' ability to heal was proof of power and authority, but that soon news travelled, and that as evening came and the Sabbath ended huge crowds of people came to him, bringing the sick and their suffering hoping for a miracle.

Amazing and wonderful as his power was, these miracles are not an end in themselves. Their purpose is not just to amaze, as if Jesus were simply a wonder-worker with a claim to fame. He has come to proclaim a message, the Good News of the coming kingdom of God.

What matters to him is that people hear and see and believe that in him, Jesus of Nazareth, God has begun a new and wonderful thing. That in this man Jesus, the kingdom of God has drawn near to them. If they have eyes to see and ears to hear, they will recognise him for who he is – the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah, God's Saviour.

Jesus can heal with a single word or with a single touch; but Mark says that although Jesus healed many people that day in Capernaum, he did not heal all who came to him. Not even Jesus would restore all people to wholeness and health in mind and body and spirit: What he did do, was give us a glimpse of how things will be one day, when God's kingdom becomes a reality and the risen Christ reigns in glory.

In this time in which we live, between Christ's first coming and Christ's return, we live in a world surrounded by powers that are hostile to God, opposed to the Gospel, that resist the impulse of God's good intentions. In our lives we still know suffering, illness and at the end, the death that Jesus himself submitted to.

What makes the difference is the good news that death is not the end, that the death on the cross opened up the possibility of resurrection and new life with God. We can now believe and trust that when this life reaches its end, death is not an ending but a new beginning.

As Christians we are called to continue the ministry that Jesus began, bringing the light of God's love to the world, that love which has power to heal and to give life. Like lights shining in the dark, we are servants to one another and to all people, as we remember that Jesus himself said that he came not to be served, but to serve. Our faithful discipleship expresses itself both as individual Christians and as a

church in reaching out to others in love. Thus may the broken and hurting lives, hearts and souls be healed, restored and made whole.

It can be a demanding calling, this we know. It requires reserves of faith, hope and love, and of integrity, courage, and perseverance; it means that Christ's disciples must be filled with the grace of God.

We know that Jesus himself found his ministry exhausting, that after that first Sabbath in Capernaum, he was spiritually and physically drained by the demands made of him: he gave of himself and of God's grace freely, but he often felt the strain. Jesus would retreat from the crowds, from people's constant needs, and from the demands they placed upon him. He would then turn to God in prayer, and take time to renew and recover his strength, so that he might continue on the way set before him.

That, too, is part of today's gospel reading, that Jesus knows there is a choice between staying in Capernaum, acclaimed and supported by those who have seen and heard and believed, or moving on to other places, setting out on a new journey, to proclaim God's kingdom, heal the people, and offer signs of God's power at work.

We know the choice Jesus made, and we know that the good news must be preached to every nation and people, and that staying put is no more an option for us than it was for Jesus. We know that we are on a journey – a journey through life that is a journey in faith; and that on the journey, we are accompanied not only by other Christians, but by the one who first said: 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.'

To follow Christ is to put our trust in him, and to believe in him is to accept we must follow, even though the journey may be difficult and the way at times uncertain. To be Christ's disciple is to take up the story where the gospel ends, and to continue his servant ministry of preaching and teaching, loving and healing, until the Holy Spirit of God brings us all to gates of the Kingdom of God.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

God of the universe,
you sit above the circle of the earth,
and so we pray for the oceans and mountains,
inland water and the air we breathe.
Save and protect them, we pray.

Since we first came to faith
we have looked to you to gather the outcasts,
heal the broken-hearted and bind up their wounds.
So we pray for the poor of the world,
the sick and the lonely.

God, you build up Jerusalem,
and so we pray for our country,
for all the countries of the world,
and for all of our leaders.

May we all come to see that your delight
is not in the strength of armies,
but in those who hope in your steadfast love.

How good it is to sing praises to you, O God.
We pray for your church,
here and around the world.
Empower us to go forth,
proclaiming the message of Christ.

Everlasting God, Creator of all, to the ends of the earth,
we bless you, for you are gracious.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour are yours, now and forever. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN: I heard the voice of Jesus say

BLESSING

May the Spirit of Jesus
take your hand and lift you up
so that you may be of service to others.