

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

AN URGENCY TO PROCLAIM

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Mark, more than any of other gospels, conveys a sense of urgency about Jesus, as if he knows his life will be short and that there is so much for him to do.

As portrayed in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' ministry begins in Capernaum on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. A year ago Diane and I visited Capernaum. We saw, within the walls of a second or third century synagogue, an excavation, at the bottom of which were even more ancient foundations and column bases of what is quite possibly the synagogue referred to in our reading from chapter 1 or Mark.

About 150 feet south of these synagogue excavations, toward the Sea of Galilee, are the foundations and walls of a cluster of small homes that date from the time of Jesus. Since the 4th century these houses have been said to include Simon Peter's house, where Jesus healed the mother of Peter's wife. In the 4th century a Roman Church was built over these ruins.

Currently, perched over the houses is a large flying saucer sitting on five pylons. Or, perhaps, a structure that looks exactly what a flying saucer might look like if you suspended it on pylons over Simon Peter's house. If you walk up the stairs into this structure, you discover it is a contemporary Roman church, with a large glass floor panels enabling you to look down to see what's up at Peter's house.

Jesus, after curing Peter's mother-in-law, and many others who came to the house at sunset, disappeared long before sunrise going to a lonely place to pray. Simon Peter and his companions searched for Jesus, and when they found him, they said, somewhat reprovingly, "Everyone is looking for you."

But Jesus responded,

"Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." Mark 1:38 CEB

I hear, in this response, in the context in which Jesus said it, a note of great urgency: Jesus is saying, I have so much work to do: a message to proclaim, places to go, people to meet, and my time is so short. Perhaps Jesus' sense of urgency arose because he was still discovering the full meaning of what he was called to do. But he knew it was something bigger than dealing with all the sick and needy in Peter's village. This sense of urgency about proclaiming what we call the Good News continues throughout the Gospel, and is dramatically portrayed in a reading of Mark's gospel by Max McLean.

Now lets go back to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah ch. 40 where I hear that same sense of urgency in the prophet's voice.

The Babylonian exile extended from about 600 BCE to about 540 BCE. The middle part of the book of Isaiah, which includes chapter 40, we know as Second Isaiah, and was probably written toward the end of Israel's 60 year exile. The author of Second Isaiah was perhaps getting anxious about the Israelites having so few still alive who remembered Judah and Jerusalem.

Given how much of the OT was written during the Exile, it is clear that the Israelites enjoyed a significant degree of religious freedom during the later years when Persian was in control, and quite possibly a degree of economic prosperity. So the Prophet has his work cut out for him. He wants to get the Israelites excited about a return.

Chapter 40 begins with the familiar “comfort, comfort my people, says your God”. With this context, listen again to part of our reading:

12Have 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.

...
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. [Isaiah 40:21-23, 27–31 (BCP)]

I hear Isaiah speaking with a strong sense of prophetic urgency. The Israelites were complaining that their life in exile was hidden from God, and that their “rights” were being ignored by God. (Sounds like a 21st century complaint, doesn’t it?) The prophet believed that God’s promised return home was approaching, but would the Israelites respond, or just sit and enjoy what had become a somewhat comfortable life under the Persians? Isaiah felt an urgent call to revive their desire to return.

For the Israelites, faith always begins with memory, memory embodied in their stories. But Isaiah sensed that their memory, and thus their faith, their hope, was fading. They

were beginning to see God as more and more transcendent – remote and beyond humankind’s cares and struggles, and less and less immanent – existing close by, acting within our time and space. They had forgotten their stories which bound them as a community and bound them to God. Their future as a community was in jeopardy.

Thus, through poetry, Isaiah reminds the Israelites of their stories of how their God created all that is and created them, led them from captivity, and called them by name.

Just stories? We often dismiss stories as something superfluous, unimportant, kids stuff. How often have we said, “That’s a great story” but with an undertone of derision and an implication of a “but” to follow. We, as offspring of the Enlightenment, just want the facts. We’ve been taught that its what you can see and measure that is important; that stores are mere fabrications.

But it is stories that have power. Think of the Jews annual Passover celebration, the centerpiece of which is a retelling of the Exodus. Most of us know some family stories that, whether we recognize it or not, shape who we are. Our nation has its stories, the Boston Tea Party, the revolutionary war, for example, stories that, whether or not factual, shape our understanding of our nation. Politicians used to write their memoirs after retirement. Now they write their story before they run for office. Almost every person thinking of running for the Presidency in 2016 has recently written a book with their story. And remember President Obama’s story, Dreams from My Father, which had a significant impact on his electability in 2004.

But stories have to be told and retold, not to revise them, but so that we remember them. I was reminded of this during our discussions about the Cluster, how few of us were still here that knew the stories of the founding of the Cluster.

Like the Children of Israel, those of us who call Jesus “Lord”, are shaped by stories. We too claim the stories of Gods creation, God’s dealings with the patriarchs and matriarchs, the Exodus, the captivity in Babylon, the prophets and the return, as our stories. Our proclamation of Jesus as the Christ would have no meaning without these stories. Thus, in Morning and Evening prayer, and in Sunday worship we read our stories of Creation, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the exodus, the Kings, the exile, as well as a reading from the Epistles and the Gospel lesson. Through these stories, our memories are refreshed, our sense of community is undergirded, and God builds up our faith.

If you read the Gospel of Mark, aloud in one sitting, you will capture Jesus’ sense of urgency. I hope we can convey that urgency in our preaching from the Gospel of Mark over the next several months, and my prayer is that Jesus’ sense of urgency will become our sense of urgency about proclaiming the Good News of the coming Kingdom of God. And, that we too may run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Amen

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