

St. Paul's Congregational Church
Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39
Source of Strength, February 4, 2018
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In a recent issue of *Christian Century*, Lawrence Wood writes: “Nobody knows her name. She may have been widowed, for she lived with two younger men who were not her sons. Their boyish enthusiasms might have made her laugh. It’s also pleasant to think that her daughter had inherited her features – whether she was stocky, or had a slender build and expressive eyes. Very likely she worked hard at chopping firewood and salting fish, helping to feed the household, watching her grandchildren. But one day she could do none of that – she was sick in bed with a fever. Her daughter would have been nearby, applying a damp cloth to her forehead. All we can do is imagine these details, because we know strangely little about her.

Everyone knows Simon Peter’s name. No one knows hers, even though what happened to her had a profound effect on Simon. She was on the verge of a major moment – for all of us. The Christian church was born with Simon’s mother-in-law.”

We often describe the church as a family, don’t we – and we have plenty of examples of that in the Bible – Simon Peter and Andrew were brothers. James and John were brothers. We know that Jesus had several brothers as well – I’m sure you can think of other examples – the early church was very much a family affair which makes sense even today – today the church grows through relationships – one person at a time.

So we go back to Peter’s mother-in-law – lying in bed very ill – probably dehydrated, utterly helpless. Then Jesus comes into the house – a very familiar thing to do – but also a brave and loving thing to do. He’s risking ritual uncleanness; risked catching her illness. The sort of thing a family member would do – then and now. And what does Jesus do? He simply took her by the hand and lifted her up.

Mr. Wood goes on to say, “The very next sentence tells us her remarkable response: according to Mark, she began to serve. In that instant the church began – it was Simon’s mother in law who first responded as so any others would, profoundly moved by the great change in her life. She

was the first deacon, in the sense of becoming a servant out of reciprocal love.”

And there’s more on this woman’s impact on our history – her amazing recovery inspired Simon to leave his nets and go off to follow Jesus. Can’t you imagine the joy here? Can’t you imagine the power of experiencing that miracle and wanting to tell others of it? And we know from our perspective that there were many more amazing things that Jesus and the disciples did during his ministry on earth. And of course, the fact that we’re here today in worship, members and friends of this church, speaks volumes about the impact of these early disciples, both those named and unnamed. It’s today when our legacy and our future meet.

We’re celebrating so much here this morning – in fact, every time we gather here in worship we are celebrating! Think about these things: the love and care, the ministry of this church – those who have gone before us who make today possible for St. Paul’s Church – maybe that makes us ask, how are we providing for the future of our church? Our legacy and our future meet right here every day, every week – and what better symbol of that than the Table that has provided strength to disciples for so many years. The generations of the faithful are indeed connected, aren’t they.

But, of course, amid the celebration is a sense of anxiety – our economic situation presents real challenges for us as individuals and as church. And the news around the world, within our own government is worrisome. Close to home, people are facing illness, loss of mobility. Many of us are worried about our parents – our children – our families. Our stress levels, in spite of all we have to celebrate can go through the roof sometimes. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed – too easy – and when we get overwhelmed, sometimes we lose our focus. Both as individuals and as church.

That takes us to the Isaiah reading: that’s exactly what was happening to the people of Israel, Isaiah’s audience. They are people of God who should be acutely aware of the power and glory of God who gives strength to the weary. But they live as people who have never heard of God – they act as though the God who brought them out of Egypt and settled them in a homeland hasn’t a clue as to what they’re thinking or feeling, or how they are living.

Listen again, hear the intensity in Isaiah’s words: have you not known? Have you not heard? In fact, he says it twice – trying to bring the people back to basics, trying to bring the people back into focus: he reminds them that the Lord God is absolutely sovereign in the universe. There is no

other meaningful power in the world! There is no other lasting power in the world!

And God's strength can be our strength.

And hear the promise: those who wait on 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.

What powerful, wonderful words. That, if we let them, can break through our feelings of being overwhelmed and move us back into living in an attitude of gratitude. And look forward to the future with a sense of joy, a sense of promise.

The fog clears – we can step back and take a deep breath, and let go and let God. We can get our focus back. We realize that we're not alone – we're not in charge – we can find hope again. We're able to see those signs of hope around us – we don't quit. We keep going. We move forward to the promise of good news. These words are for us today just as much as they were for those ancient people of Israel.

How do you find – re-find – your focus. When have you felt yourself lifted as on eagle's wings by a sense of God's presence with you?

And we have to take the time to do that, don't we.

I so enjoy being in Falconer Hall when the Food Pantry is open – meeting both the volunteers and the guests who come for food to feed their families. It was busy this week – 42 families came on Wednesday – they were lined up outside. On Thursday it was quieter – there would be several families there at the same time but then there were times when it was just the volunteers in the room. After we'd replenished the supplies of fresh produce and tidied up the shelves, someone commented on how quiet it was. I said, you know, if we only had 3 families here today it would be worthwhile – we're doing God's work here and there would be 3 families who would eat good and nutritious food for a few days. Jesus tells us to feed the sheep, not count them. Nods around the room and soon there was another wave of guests.

I found myself finding a sense of peace, of God's presence there in Falconer Hall – it was wonderful. Is there a place that helps you know God's presence in a powerful way? Go there! Meet God! Let God's presence work in and through you. Get your focus back. And then let's get our focus back as church as we gather to worship and then go out to do the daily work of being church. We can't quit as church either – God is calling us to new and profound ministries – and God won't give up on us – ever. And if God doesn't quit, we can't either.

Henri Nouwen writes in his final journal in 1996, “God says, I am your God and will be faithful to you even when you won’t be faithful to me. Our life is full of brokenness, broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God’s faithful presence in our lives? Without this place of return, our journey easily leads us to darkness and despair. But with this safe and solid home, we can keep renewing our faith, and keep trusting that the many setbacks of life move us forward to an always greater bond with the God of the covenant.”

Wonderful words for ourselves as individuals and as church. And words that will give us the strength and courage to proclaim the message through our ministries near and far. We have an incredible history – from Peter’s mother in law and so many other unnamed women to the saints of today – to all those who have gone before us to those who work so hard today to create this safe and solid home. And through it all we have God’s faithful presence in covenant, in the good times and in the hard times. But we can’t quit. Because God doesn’t quit.

There’s a story that has circulated the internet: a woman wanted to encourage her young son’s progress on the piano so she took him to a Paderewski concert. After they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually explored his way to a door marked “no admittance.” When the houselights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and found that her child was missing. Suddenly the curtains opened and the spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” At that moment the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy’s ear, “Don’t quit – keep playing.”

Then leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added a running accompaniment. Together the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. And the audience was mesmerized.

Whatever our situation in life, however outrageous, however desperate, whether dry spell of the spirit, whatever dark night of the soul, whatever celebrations we have, God is whispering deep within our beings – don’t quit. Keep playing! You are not alone. Together we will transform the broken patterns into a masterwork of my creative art.

A masterwork of my creative art – doesn't that sound like an awesome goal for us as church? Just imagine the music we can make together.

Our strength shall be renewed! We shall mount up like eagle's wings. We shall run and not be weary. We shall walk and not faint. And we shall proclaim the message for years to come!

May God's spirit work in and through each one of us – as individuals and as church, members of the body of Christ –now and tomorrow and all the days to come! Amen!