

Our Balancing Act: (Isaiah 40: 21-31, Mark 1:29-39)

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning begins with a question although literally it is a series of questions. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” This is one of those times when the rendering of the Hebrew into English loses some of the effect. As we read it, it is prose. As it was written it was poetry; a poem praising the power of the Lord. It draws a picture of God, creator of all things; eternal and powerful ruling over the earth while the people addressed and earthly rulers are fragile and are as nothing. This was addressed to a people who had been living in exile for some time. A people who had depended on the idea they were special to God; that God would always protect them in the land their ancestors had been promised and given. Yet the Temple was destroyed. They were marched away from that land to live in exile among people who worshiped many gods. They yearned for what they had lost. They felt powerless. When they heard these words, many of them would have doubted Isaiah’s statements telling them that God was everlasting. They felt abandoned. If God was truly in command, what did it mean that they were living in exile? Instead of being special, did they no longer matter? When Isaiah reposes the questions which began his poem, the people probably felt that: “No, they did not know this God about whom Isaiah spoke. Instead they respond that their condition seems hidden from the Lord and their “right is disregarded by their God.” Their lives illustrated a different reality to them than a powerful caring God. Isaiah is calling them to look beyond their experiences. They are not to attempt to reconcile what has happened in their lives to what they know to be true of their God from their distant past. This poem announces that it is God alone who provides the hope for their future because God alone is the one who creates and who continues to create—even in their present. Isaiah reminds the people of their history, what God has accomplished. He tells them to remember the stories of their past. God has acted in the past to bring “princes to naught”. Isaiah affirms that God does not grow weary but will give power to the faint and strengthen the powerless. Even those who because of their youth should be strong can faint and be weary, but those who wait for the Lord will find their strength renewed. When we read this verse about waiting for the Lord, we usually think of it in terms of time—perhaps of being patient while we wait for the Lord to renew our strength or answer a prayer. But there is another facet to this waiting for the Lord which might be better described as trusting that the Lord will renew our strength. Patient waiting is certainly better than impatiently waiting which opens the way for doubts to enter. But that type of waiting is passive. Understanding that waiting for the Lord means trusting that the Lord will renew our strength opens the way to moving forward. While reviewing my notes about Hebrew language structure, I came across a reference that stated that in Hebrew poetry triplets; that is, three line sequences carry an implied meaning about the importance of the statements. We have one of those sequences at the end of this passage. “They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” The order of importance of these statements in Hebrew is that they become more important as they progress. Looking at these statements wouldn’t you think that soaring with eagles would be better than running without being weary and walking without fainting surely is less impressive than even running without being tired. You would think that soaring like eagles would be the ultimate experience, the pinnacle moment promised by the poem. Yet as we go through life we are often so very tired.

Sometimes, no matter how attractive it is to think of soaring like eagles, all we can manage is to put one foot in front of the other, over and over again as we walk. But perhaps that is indeed the best thing we can do. Perhaps being able to walk through life in confidence with the strength to handle what comes is more of a gift than soaring briefly like an eagle. Just simply being able to walk in faith and strength day by day because God accompanies us is indeed a great gift. In our gospel reading this morning we again encounter Jesus acting with authority and really creating something of an uproar in the village of Capernaum. The power that Isaiah talked about is on display. It is still that same Sabbath day where Jesus casts out an unclean spirit. Jesus has walked the short distance from the synagogue to the home of Simon's mother-in-law. Again we see God's power demonstrated as upon entering the home of the ill woman, Jesus is told of her condition. His response is also immediate although simple. He merely takes her hand and lifts her up and she is healed. There are no rituals performed, no words said. While we are not told the man's reaction after the casting out of the demon in last week's passage, in this case the woman responds by getting up and serving them. There are many in the feminist movement who object to this verse as it has been used to define a role for women as servants. But in the context of her day, her response was a restoration. While she was ill she was unable to contribute to the well-being of her household and community. By healing her, Jesus restored not only her health but her connection to her community. The Greek word used to describe what she did is the same word used to describe the role given to those in the early church community; that role which we now know as deacon. It literally means to wait on or to serve, but it also carries the meaning of to care for or to minister to. Her response to the healing she was given was to actively give back. The passage tells us not that she "served them" using the past tense, but that she "began to serve them" which implies a continuing action on her part. In her culture her illness deprived her of her place in society which her healing allowed her to resume. Of course, the news of her healing spreads rapidly throughout the village. As soon as sundown comes which ends the Sabbath, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. Not only that, but the whole city gathered around the door to the house and watched. Jesus' response is again immediate. Again we are not given any teachings, only actions. He heals and cares for and restores countless people, setting them free from illness and possession to be what God created them to be. Jesus enacts what Isaiah spoke of God doing—the renewing of those who come to him. God wants to set free all of us so that we might live into our God-given identity and potential, claiming our call as children of God. We often focus on this freeing which our life in Christ gives us. But perhaps we focus too much on what we are freed from. Do we think only of our benefit? We joyfully celebrate that **we** are freed from the burden of sin. We speak of how **we** are freed from various signs of sin like fear, loss, despair, insecurity, and the list goes on to include many things that plague or worry us. In this gospel passage it is obvious that Jesus has freed Peter's mother-in-law **from** the consequences of her illness. He frees crowds of people from disease and possession as well. But there is that other dimension in the story, Jesus frees not only **from** but also **for**. The same is true for us today, we are not only freed **from** the things that oppress us, but we are also freed **for** a life of purpose, meaning, and participation in God's work. We too are freed to serve. This, I think sums up the balancing act that we need to keep in mind. We have to understand that although God is eternal and almighty that doesn't mean that we will not face difficulties. When difficult times come we need to wait on the Lord in trust which does not allow doubt.

With our trust that God is all powerful and is still working in our world we don't passively wait for the brokenness to just disappear. God is there with us and has through grace redeemed us. But the redemption is not just for our sake, but for a purpose. We are called to follow as disciples of Jesus who responded to need with actions of healing. We too have a purpose. That purpose may differ in specific details depending upon our gifts. What we do may not be earthshaking, but it does matter. We must balance our trust in God with the reality of the broken world. We must balance our joy in the gift of grace we receive with the purpose to work in God's service in this broken world. God is in control and that we are freed from many of the things which separate us from God through Christ's work but that this does not mean that we sit back and wait for God's intervention in the brokenness around us. Although in the Isaiah passage, God is shown as all powerful and sitting above the earth which could be seen as God's being distant from us. In the gospel we encounter Jesus, God who came and walked among us; still full of power but not distant from the cares of those he encounters. Isaiah spent much of his life as a prophet struggling, striving, and working to save Jerusalem from the compromise, corruption and faithlessness behavior which resulted in their exile. Isaiah never lost sight of who God is. Isaiah must have at some point been horribly discouraged about the fate of his people. Yet at the end of the work attributed to him, we find that his faith that those who trust in the Lord will be empowered is strong. Jesus, after aiding all those brought to him went to a deserted place to pray and be restored. This period of rest was interrupted by Simon and others with the news the folks in Capernaum wanted him to return there. Jesus' response was that he must move on to proclaim his message in other places. "And he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons." This was to be a pattern for Jesus' entire ministry on earth: Proclamation of the unconditional acceptance of God for all, to all. Healing of the sick and the casting out of darkness called unclean spirits. Then these deeds of power were followed by a retreat into prayer. Jesus balanced his mission to the world with time in prayer. We too are called to balance our lives of discipleship with actions of service and times of prayer.