

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
February 4, 2018
Epiphany 5B 2018
Isaiah 40: 21-31 (Mark 1:29-39)

Today, I'm mostly going to focus on the first reading from Isaiah—but there's one part of the Gospel that I want to lift up. It's the very brief story of Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Maybe this story sounds different during a bad flu season, but the detail that catches my attention is how right after the fever leaves her, she gets up and starts taking care of her guests.

In the past, this part of the story made me a little mad. Why is a woman who has just gotten out of bed, having to wait on a bunch of visitors who dropped by unexpectedly? Can't she catch a break?

Then somehow this time I shifted to focusing on the fever part. I don't get them very often, but nothing wears me out like a fever. I always feel wiped out for the better part of a day after a fever. So, it's striking that this woman is completely better immediately. Jesus has not just gotten rid of the fever, he's restored her to full health.

If you've been sick for an extended period of time, you know how hard it is to be tired. You'd give anything to have some energy—and instead of everyone bringing things to you in bed, you'd give *anything* to be the one up and about, doing things for other people. You're just so tired of being tired.

Weariness. Not just tired--but tired of being tired.

I know there's some weariness here today. There's the weariness of looking for a job. Weariness from *too much* work.

Weariness that comes from trying so hard to find a way to make your child well, and hitting dead end after dead end. Weariness that comes from grief that feels like it will never end.

And there's weariness that comes from our own physical and mental health struggles that seem to take over our lives.

At this moment in history, I think that we are also experiencing some weariness as a country. There are so many worries and problems—and every day we're bombarded with so much information about so many things that are wrong—and that make us afraid. The relentlessness of all that can make us weary.

In the middle of weariness, people of faith ask questions of God—and questions about God. I think the most painful question we ask God is not, "Why?", but "Where are you?" Because when we ask "Where are you?" it's because we can't feel or see God with us. That is a hard place to be.

It's the place where the Jewish people are in the time that Isaiah is writing. They're returning from exile in Babylon to a promised land that is in ruins. And the holy city, Jerusalem—is a shambles. The temple and the wall are a pile of rocks. If there ever was a picture of God having fled the scene, this was it.

Behind that question, “Where are you, God?”, are other questions: “What kind of God are you?” “Do you care?” “Do you have power?” “If you care and you have power, why aren't you showing it?”

We know these questions because these are the questions we ask when we are weary.

I imagine these are questions that three Indonesian men in New Jersey are asking. These men are all ethnic Chinese and Christian. In the late 1990s, in Indonesia, there was a bloodbath against the ethnic Chinese—many of whom are Christian. These three men, fearing for their lives, came to the U.S. on tourist visas. They stayed and settled in New Jersey, had children, got jobs, joined churches.

After 9/11 there was a big crackdown on Indonesians, and these three men went to Immigration and turned themselves in. They've been here all these years, reporting for all their check-ins.

Until last week, when two of these men were detained by ICE *while they were dropping their kids off at school*. These men could have been detained at any one of their regular check-ins, but instead they are taken away *in front of their kids*. Those are actions that are designed to terrorize—and they are cruel.

“God, where are you?”

The third Indonesian father, a man by the name of Harry, just the week before, had received the MLK Community Service award for his outstanding work in the community. Harry had repaired 209 houses that were damaged in Super Storm Sandy—and now ICE agents were pounding on his door. Harry called his pastor and fled out the back door.

His church, the Reformed Church of Highland Park, took Harry into Sanctuary. Being in Sanctuary means that Harry is living at the church—more than that—that he is not leaving the church, with the hope that ICE agents will not enter the church to arrest him.

So, back to the question that people of faith have been asking for a long time. Where are you, God?

Isaiah has a couple of answers. The first one sounds a bit like God's response to Job: “Who are you to be asking the question?” It's a putting us in our place kind of response. It's a picture of a God who is above us and beyond our understanding. A God who is the creator of all that is and who is more powerful than any human ruler—even if it doesn't look that way at times. In classical theological terms, it's the transcendent God.

I actually believe that all of this is true about God. But when we are weary—this picture of a God who is above it all—is not enough. I believe in a God who “does not faint or grow weary.” But what I need is a God who “gives power to the faint”—a God who “strengthens the powerless.”

When we are weary—when we just can’t put one foot in front of the other and move forward—we need a God who is in it with us—and not just in it but changing it. A God who can give us power and strength. A God who can lift us up when we can’t get up ourselves.

Who God is, what God is like, is something we are always searching for and trying to understand. One of the most helpful things I read this week is that we “come to know how God works through years of living with God and God’s people.”

We help each other see where God is.

I think that is true in a new way for Harry and the people of the Reformed Church of Highland Park. Harry fled persecution and is now in the middle of it again. But he has been offered a safe space in a church—in a holy place—a place set apart for God’s work.

I think about the Temple and how it was understood to be the place where God is especially present. And how now this church is a place where Harry and the whole congregation know God to be especially present in a whole new way.

I visited this week with Bob and Dorothy Pohlman who have worshiped with us—and who are well known to some of us here. Bob has an uncommon cancer that has spread. He’s had treatments that have not helped—in fact, they have made him weaker.

When I arrived at their house, I was thinking that I might be there 45 minutes—if Bob was up to it. But, thankfully, I was there closer to an hour and a half—most of it spent in lively conversation.

Bob and Dorothy were members of an alternative Lutheran church called, Community of Christ in Mount Pleasant. They are people with a deep sense of God’s presence and activity in their lives and the life of the world. In our conversation, there were stories of what that looks like. There was laughter and amazement and tears. But what really stands out for me is the gratitude.

Bob said they are so grateful for the gift of time. They had a nephew—53 years old—who dropped dead of a heart attack at work last summer. They have time—to be with each other and their daughters. One daughter—who lives on the West Coast-- has a boss who told her she can work remotely—and that they’ll talk about it again next year. So, she’s here—given the gift of time.

There's a lot of physical weariness—Bob from the cancer and the effects of the treatment and Dorothy from caring for him. But in the midst of that physical weariness, there was a renewed spiritual strength. And that spiritual strength clearly had the upper hand.

So, once again, I had the experience of supposedly being the one who is giving care and support—and instead, being the one who receives it. My faith was strengthened in that visit. I could witness God's active presence in Bob and Dorothy—and my own weariness was lifted.

I know the truth of how we come to know how God works through years of living with God and God's people. Sometimes we are the ones who bear witness to God's active presence and sometimes we are the ones who receive that witness.

That's what it means to be a community—a community of people who—however haltingly—trust that God is with us. A people who can wait together for God to renew our strength.

Thanks be to God. Amen.