Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/8/2015, The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39
Waiting for the Lord

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

30Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. 31And [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them. (Mark 1:30-31, RSV)

Saint Jerome, preaching on this text back in 400 AD, made the perfect pastoral point about it. He starts off like this:

O that he would come to our house…

Jesus! That is who we mean: O that Jesus would come to our house. I have such deep desire for that as I think of the houses and hospital rooms of our people. If Jesus were to come, then things would be okay. As he took the hand of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and lifted her up to health, so I hope and pray that Jesus will come again soon to this old world of ours, go around and enter into the house of our people and make them well. And not just the people of Immanuel, but all the people. O that Jesus would walk into the house of the weary and suffering people of this world, take them by the hand, lift them up and let them run and jump like deer, like when we were young!

So, that’s how Jerome begins his passage. Let me read the remainder of it for you, because the rest is important too:

O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers.1

In this sermon, I mean to speak of this Gospel story, for I believe that we feverish people can receive some encouragement from it. But I want to approach this important story by way of our First Lesson, which is one of the great passages of faith and poetry in the Bible. I am speaking of Isaiah 40. Even a glance at that beautiful text leads us to two encouraging thoughts about Jesus healing the feverish lady. First, of course he can heal her, for he is the majestic God spoken of

---

in Isaiah’s testimony. And second, not only can Jesus heal the lady, but he does, because he is also the compassionate God spoken of in Isaiah. So, let’s set the stage for Mark 1 by taking a brief look at Isaiah 40.

**Isaiah 40**

Isaiah is addressed to a discouraged and worn-down people. They are the Israelite exiles in Babylon. By all normal reckoning in the ancient world, their God had been disproved. Marduk must be stronger than the LORD. That’s how people made sense of things. The god of Babylon – Marduk – must be stronger than the god of Israel – the LORD – else how had Babylon been able to defeat Judah?

And setting aside the religious perspective, the political realities were obvious: Babylon was stronger than Judah — way stronger! Nebuchadnezzar had hardly flexed his muscles, and it blew Judah all to pieces. The might of Babylon had left Jerusalem in smoking ruins, with her walls demolished and her beloved Temple leveled.

By now, by the time of Isaiah 40, a generation of Israelites had lived in captivity. The prophets, including Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had tried to keep faith alive in the exiles by arguing that their defeat by Babylon did not disprove the LORD, but rather the reverse: It was not Marduk that had defeated the Israelites but rather the LORD himself. The LORD had done it because of Judah’s sins, just as the LORD had promised to do through his holy prophets.

Be that as it may, by the time of our text, Isaiah 40, the Israelite captives are downhearted and probably see little objective reason for hope. These are the people with whom Isaiah reasons. These are the people Isaiah comforts.

First he does so by speaking of the majesty of the LORD. That’s the part about the grasshoppers:

22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; (Isaiah 40:22, NRSV)

This includes the mighty ones of this earth — not only kings, but also wealthy and influential people. Let them fly around this earth on gold-plated private jets or whatever. It does not matter. Compared to their Maker, they are like grasshoppers.

Let me go back a verse or two before our particular text to pick up another of the images by which Isaiah praises the LORD. He does so by comparing the nations of this earth to a drop of water:

15 Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket…(Isaiah 40:15, KJV)

It puts me in mind of my grandmother’s rain barrel. The eaves of the old roof slanted down toward that rain barrel, and many of the rains on the roof ended up
there. She washed her clothes in water she collected from that rain barrel and then set them out to dry in the sunshine. How small and insignificant is “a drop of a bucket.” It takes many, many drops just to do a load of wash. During last Sunday’s Super Bowl, there was an ad for Norwegian Cruise Line making the theme that humanity has the sea in our blood. Maybe so, but what I’m thinking of now is simply how vast is the sea. How vast the Great Lakes and the rivers of our land. And how tiny and passing is any one drop amidst all that water. And yet, “behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket.”

Fear not, oh you captives. Fear not that you have been forever conquered and exiled by mighty Babylon. Compared to your God, Babylon is next to nothing, a mere drop of a bucket, dust on a scale.

So, that is Isaiah’s first point to the exiles. Her God is a mighty God. If the LORD wills to set her free, there is not a thing on earth, nor even in the stars and moons of the sky that can stop her freedom. Israel’s God is a majestic God. Indeed, he is the creator of heaven and earth, of Babylon and Israel, of every nation on the face of our planet to this very day.

Let’s move on to Isaiah’s second theme: Not only can the LORD rescue the captives, but he means to do so because he cares about them. Indeed, he means to renew their strength. And so we come to Isaiah’s famous words about the wings of eagles:

29 He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
31 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 40:29-31, NRSV)

Some of the captives in Babylon had probably grown old there, for much time had passed since the fall of Jerusalem. And some of the captives were probably young and rambunctious, with the energy and optimism natural to youth. But Isaiah knows that all of them — young and old alike — are capable of becoming discouraged and worn out. Even young people can become weary:

30 Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;

But to all of these folks, both old and young, Isaiah gives strong encouragement. Wait for the LORD, he says, and the LORD will renew your strength. He will do it!

31 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.  

That’s because the LORD never, ever forgets his people. If they will wait for him, he will renew their strength.

SIMON’S MOTHER-IN-LAW  
Now, let’s turn to Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. She is faint with fever. Isaiah had said that the LORD pays attention to such as her:

29He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless. (Isaiah 40:29, NRSV)

From her story, I think we can learn something about waiting — I mean, waiting for the Lord. Simon Peter comes from good stock. Or at least his wife comes from good stock, for this mother-in-law can teach us a thing or two about waiting.  
The first sense in which this lady waits for the Lord is a communal sense. She has waited for the Messiah along with all of Israel. She has waited for the prophet like unto Moses, along with all of Israel. Much of this communal waiting had already been put in before Jesus ever stepped foot through her door. I mean, Isaiah’s promise to the captives had been given centuries earlier, and the fair-to-middlin’ centuries in between in no measure fulfilled Israel’s hopes and dreams. True, the Jewish exiles had been set free and some of them had returned home to Judah. But that was a poor victory, with a devastated city to rebuild, with a flattened Temple to rebuild, and with strong enemy empires sweeping over them through the years. In no way had they yet mounted up “with wings like eagles.” Simon’s mother-in-law was waiting along with Israel for salvation. She was waiting in faith. That is one sense of what it means to “wait for the Lord.” She waits for the Messiah. Along with old Simeon and old Anna in the Temple, she waits for the Holy One of God.  
Then, one day, he steps through the door. Jesus had already demonstrated his majesty and authority. That’s what last Sunday’s Gospel story was about. The people in synagogue were amazed by his teaching and wondered at his authority. And well they should be amazed, because Jesus stood among them not simply as a preacher who knew something of the truth, but who knew the entirety of it, who indeed was the Truth himself, the very Word of God. Naturally, the demons in the poor man in the synagogue had fled at the command of Jesus. Compared to the Maker of heaven and earth, the demons are like dust on the balance:

2He was in the beginning with God; 3all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:2-3, RSV)
And so the haunted man in the synagogue had been healed.

Now, this same Jesus steps through her door, and she who had been among the faint and weary ones on earth is given new strength:

31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her… (Mark 1:31, RSV)

YOU WEARY ONES OF THIS EARTH

Weary ones of this earth, let this picture of Jesus taking the lady by the hand, lifting her up, and banishing her fever encourage you in your own weakness. Some of you are knocked down by diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, bad knees, bad backs, back hearts. Some of you are simply slowing down, with no apparent illness, but just weakened by the accumulation of the years. Some of you are ground down by poverty or by the disregard of others. You face no particular crisis that will resolve itself soon one way or the other. It is simply that you have been struggling for years to make ends meet, you are worn out by it, and you see no practical hope in sight. Or you have been neglected, overlooked, taken for granted, and generally disregarded for so long that even you doubt yourself and think yourself of little importance to anyone on this earth.

Or you have been laid low in morality by your bad habits, by your laziness, by your lust, by your addictions:

So many vices, so many fevers.

If so, if you lie low with fever or faintness, be pleased to know that Jesus is capable of raising you up again. If it be physical sickness that leaves you weak, know that one day you will be strong and joyful again, no matter what the doctor says, because Jesus will see to it. Meanwhile, continue your prayers in his name that he will not tarry with his healing, but will grant it to you very soon. Pray for those doctors and therapists of yours. Pray in the name of Jesus.

If you are faint from want of this world’s affection, be pleased to know that it is especially you that the LORD keeps his eye upon. Today’s Psalm sings of this:

3 He heals the brokenhearted
   and binds up their wounds.
6 The Lord lifts up the lowly… (Psalm 147, LBW)

There will come a time when you will sit with angels and be judges of the world:

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? (1 Corinthians 6:2, RSV)
Hold you head up and carry yourselves with gentleness and dignity till then. And if we suffer with St. Jerome’s fevers of vice, perhaps we can learn a most interesting notion of “waiting for the Lord” from Simon Peter’s mother-in-law: She literally waited on him. She got up and waited on Jesus:

31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them. (Mark 1:31, RSV)

In this, this dear woman contrasts with her son-in-law, Simon Peter. In the very next verses we learn that Simon tracks Jesus down when our Lord has withdrawn from the crowd. In the morning, a great while before day, Jesus “went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). But Simon finds him and almost chastises Jesus, as if to say, “You ought to get back to work”:

36 And Simon and those who were with him pursued him, 37 and they found him and said to him, “Every one is searching for you.” (Mark 1:36-37, RSV)

Peter himself does seem to lift a finger to help the sick and those in need. He puts it all on Jesus. But not so Simon’s mother-in-law. She doesn’t ask Jesus to serve her, but rather she rises from her bed and serves him and the others. Let it be so with you and me too. If we are suffering with the fevers of vice, perhaps a miracle is available to us: perhaps it is precisely in the serving of Jesus and others that we will be most able to leave those fevers of vice behind. It is in the practical deeds of service, day by day, that we become more like our Master, Jesus. It is in serving him with as much strength and integrity as we can, that bit by bit we will transform ourselves in his direction — in the direction of a more holy life.

For each of us, whether we think ourselves feverish or not, it is good for us to follow the example of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and rise up from our beds and serve Christ and our neighbors. Until when? Till, as John Henry Newman put it in his famous prayer…

…till the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest and peace at the last.2

Through Jesus Christ, the One who healed Simon’s mother-in-law and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

2 This nice reference to Newman’s prayer is found in Lamar Williamson’s commentary on Mark, cited earlier.