

HEALED FOR SERVICE

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Texts: Isaiah 40:28-31; Mark 1:29-31

I don't know if you read the minutes for mission listed on the back the bulletin each Sunday, I would like to encourage you to read them (not during the sermon) because they provide great information about some of the missions we support with our mission giving.

Most of the time I have no disagreement with them but this week's minute contains a point of contention. The writer, Jill Minnich, wrote, "...the Super Bowl...tests the mettle of the best football players from the best football teams." I would imagine that many of us in this room would debate that point; I think we might be inclined to say that the best football had an unfortunate day three weeks ago and is not in the Super Bowl today.

So, in spite of the festive celebration today, at least for people in the northeast of the United States, some of us feel disappointment because we know that the best football team is not playing. Many of us do identify closely with our favorite sports teams and when they go down in defeat, we may feel like it is us who have also gone down in defeat. But we know that for the most part, it is for fun and life goes on...maybe. We can also console ourselves by saying, "Well, there's always next year!"

But, what if the experience is not just vicarious? And what if there is no next year...maybe not even the possibility of an ever after?

That is the situation for the people Isaiah addresses in the passage we heard this morning.

Imagine you are there. The people are exiles in a strange land who have lost everything. Even if you do not remember the actual defeat, you are surrounded by the memories of the survivors.

You will hear the stories of how the Babylonian army, superior in every way—much to the consternation of the leaders and the belief of exceptionalism—swept aside all opposition even from the mighty Egyptians and besieged the city of Jerusalem. In two awful years, the siege tightened until finally the walls were breached, the city burned, the Temple torn down, the treasures looted and carried off to Babylon. King Zedekiah, as well as the citizens of the city, was forced to watch the brutal execution of his children and then his blinding. The 1% of Judah was paraded off to Babylon where they faced derision and harassment from the citizens of Babylon; these elite were then forced to work menial tasks and provide for their own farming in the hot and humid conditions of the lower Tigris and Euphrates river valley.

You would hear tales of the beautiful cool and green hills of western Judah. The Jews known for the beauty of their music would now be forced to sing for the entertainment of the Babylonians. Everything you loved and held dear is now gone: land, home, heritage, and perhaps even your children. Even your faith would be challenged; the worldview held by most people believed that your war was also cosmic; if you had lost to the Babylonians then surely YHWH must have lost to the Babylonian gods!

What hope would you have? Your strength and your future have been utterly smashed.

Yet this preacher, speaking in the name of his school's founder, Isaiah, has the audacity to claim that you have every reason to hope. Who says that God is defeated? He proclaims, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" God is creator of all, God made everything and everyone. There are no Babylonian gods who created this world; there are no rulers or princes who made what we use in this world. Only God has made the world and we who inhabit it. Is it madness that this preacher can make these claims in the midst of our despair and hopelessness?

When we rely only our strength and power and wisdom, we will fail. The preacher cries out that it is God who lifts us up even when we feel weak and lost. Have you not known? Have you not heard?

With such words, do we feel a stirring in our hearts; does hope finally sprout in the dry ground of our uncertainty and despair? Will we wait for the Lord?

Perhaps the sense of hopelessness comes from a more personal experience. Do you remember the last time you fell ill whether conquered by some disease terrible or something small?

Imagine that a fever lays you low, sapping your strength and narrowing your focus. The world seems composed only of discomfort and fear. The minutes drag by and the future seems uncertain. You sleep when you can even though such sleep is restless and unsatisfying but it is your only respite from pain and total exhaustion.

Imagine that you live in world without many analgesics or antibiotics for infection. A fever can be mortal and so your hope shrinks—your family gathers in dread that you might not be long with them.

Then comes into the house that new friend of your son-in-law. He kneels beside your bed and lays a cool hand on your forehead; his calming touch draws out the heat of your fever, the weight of lethargy from your arms and legs, and the sense of hopelessness from your soul. He takes your hand and lifts you up.

You do not rely on your own strength or your own power. Have you not known? Have you not heard? God gives strength and hope when we feel most lost. We discover that we do not live for ourselves alone.

We realize that God's healing is never healing for its own sake. Healing allows us once again to respond to God's call. I think we quickly discover that while healing may not be a cure for whatever ails us as individuals or as a community of faith, healing does restore a sense of service to God's call. Sometimes our call will be renewed and other times our call may be directed to a new place.

In every case, though, God still provides us the strength; it is God who lifts us so that we walk again with our God. Whether we are a community wondering where God could be in the midst of this broken and disheartening world or an individual who has suffered through bodily change because of illness, God will renew our strength so that we can serve as God's people in the world to reach out to others in the loving justice God desires for all God's children. Even in our weakest moment, God has empowered us to serve.

May we open our ears and hearts in prayer and in hope, ready for God to lift us up. Have you not known? Have you not heard? God is the creator of all that is and God does not grow weary. We are surrounded with love and grace—shall we wait for the Lord?