|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The Lessons Appointed for Use on the** | http://www.lectionarypage.net/Art/Newshield.gif |
| Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany |
| Year B RCL |

Isaiah 40:21-31

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

**The Collect**

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.*Amen.*

**Old Testament**

**Isaiah 40:21-31**

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?   
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,

when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?

He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;

because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,   
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,

"My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.

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

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.

**The Response**

**Psalm 147:1-12, 21c**

***Laudate Dominum***

1 Hallelujah!  
How good it is to sing praises to our God! \*  
how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!

2 The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem; \*  
he gathers the exiles of Israel.

3 He heals the brokenhearted \*  
and binds up their wounds.

4 He counts the number of the stars \*  
and calls them all by their names.

5 Great is our Lord and mighty in power; \*  
there is no limit to his wisdom.

6 The Lord lifts up the lowly, \*  
but casts the wicked to the ground.

7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; \*  
make music to our God upon the harp.

8 He covers the heavens with clouds \*  
and prepares rain for the earth;

9 He makes grass to grow upon the mountains \*  
and green plants to serve mankind.

10 He provides food for flocks and herds \*  
and for the young ravens when they cry.

11 He is not impressed by the might of a horse; \*  
he has no pleasure in the strength of a man;

12 But the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, \*  
in those who await his gracious favor.

21 Hallelujah!

**The Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

**The Gospel**

**Mark 1:29-39**

After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us …..*Amen.*

Throughout time, the meanings of words change and that is expected; spoken languages are not dead. So, what at one time a word like “sin” that didn’t have baggage associated with it, now has lots of baggage associated with it. In fact, many people who turn away from organized religion do so because there is a desire for something spiritual but not religious and the concept of sin seems too “blaming.” And no one wants to be blamed whether individually or as a society. So let us think for a moment about the phrase “bondage of sin.” There is some good evidence that the meaning behind this phrase was meant to be anything we do that turns us away from God.

Let us look at our readings through that lens. In each of the passages this morning, there is a call to not be held by something that would take our energy away from God.

In the passage from Isaiah, there is an assurance that God is all powerful and transcendent and wants abundant life for us, even if we are like grasshoppers. Still God is interested particularly when we pay attention to God.

“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.”

It is not that hard. You can be set free and have abundant life.

The psalm is a song of praise and it echoes the themes of Isaiah, there is the vastness of God the description of which takes up most of the verses we read from the psalm today and there is an intimacy as well, which we see in the terminal lines.

“But the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, \*  
in those who await his gracious favor.”

God’s gracious favor comes when you don’t turn away from God.

Mark’s Gospel is deceptively short and as is often the case in Mark, packed with information, some of which gets, if not lost, a little hazy in the translation. We are still in the first chapter of Mark. In a few short verses, Jesus already has called four disciples and cast out a demon. We have moved from synagogue to Peter’s mother in law’s house. She is sick with a fever. Jesus comes to her. It reads, “He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

It is not a demon *per se*, but the thought at the time was that fever had possession of a person, just like a demon. This is why the fever “left her.” Illness could feasibly separate you from God. Jesus takes her and lifts her up. She begins to serve. This is her role, serving is not a put down. This is doing what needs to be done, but also what she is called to do. Pay attention, now and later in Mark— it is often the women who do what is required of them. This word for serving is διηκόνει, the same word from which we get deacon. It is what we are all called to do. We are set free to serve God. We turn towards God, not away.

Yet, even more striking, when Jesus “lifts her up” this is the same verb that we see when Jesus was raised up to heaven. She is raised up to a new life. Fevers sometimes left old women as it did in this case and sometimes fevers left old women because they died from them. But in this encounter with Jesus, the living God, he offers new life, a life not separated from God.

This is what Paul writes about in the first letter to the Corinthians as well. Paul is not trying to be a chameleon. Instead Paul understands that his life has been raised up. He knows his part is to be a servant to spread the Gospel. He has no choice. His heart is totally taken over by his task. Even though some people can have a problem with some passages attributed to Paul’s writings, Paul does totally understand that nothing can separate him from the love of God (Romans).

Paul understands that what matters is not how he or others call himself—-whether that be Jew, Gentile, under law, etc, —- but what matters is ***who*** calls him. Who calls him then causes him to identify with others who are across barriers that separate people. Barriers that we either with effort erect or that we are complicit in allowing them to be erected. The love of God in Jesus is the gateway across all barriers, the gateway to fellowship and true understanding across peoples of the earth. We are set free to be in communion.

When we encounter Jesus, the living God, we too are called so completely that nothing else matters. Likewise when Jesus raises us, he gives us the permission to be totally new people, in new ways; we are reborn to preach, to serve and to spread the Good News of the in-breaking of the kingdom, to all people however they identify themselves. We are lifted up, lifted up from the bondage of sin, to a life flourishing which is God’s desire for us.

And what if you are sitting in your chair, and I am essentially at the end of the sermon, and you think to yourself, “but I do turn away from God. What if I can't turn toward God? What then? How is this call to do what I should do, by which I would flourish, GOOD NEWS, when in fact I don't?”

It is an old bind, you share it with Luther….

The Good News is that God has invited you to flourish. There is a way. There is the Way— the Way of Christ.