

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

February 8, 2009

Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Sermon: "From Grasshoppers to Eagles"

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" says the prophet Isaiah as he issues words of comfort to the people of Israel. Spoken right before the fall of Babylon to the armies of Cyrus the Persian (539 B.C.), the Isaiah was attempting to remind the people that God was the creator and Lord of all. Isaiah spoke of a coming new day for God's people. It would be a time when great justice would take place. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together . . ." (Isa. 40:4-5b). The Lord would rule with justice and fairness, he would be like a shepherd holding his sheep, and the world's inhabitants (grasshoppers) would be like renewed with the strength and beauty of eagles. In no uncertain words, Isaiah lets us know that God cares for God's children everywhere. God has the whole world in his hands.

No one knows her name. She may have been widowed, for she lived with two younger men who were not her sons. Their boyish enthusiasms might have made her laugh. It's also pleasant to think that her daughter had inherited her features-whether she was stocky, or had a slender build and expressive eyes. Very likely she worked hard at chopping firewood and salting fish, helping to feed the household, watching her grandchildren. But one day she could do none of that, for she was sick in bed with a fever. Her daughter would have been nearby, applying a damp cloth to her forehead. All we can do is imagine these details, because we know strangely little about her. Everyone knows Simon Peter's name. No one knows hers, even though what happened to her had a profound effect

on Simon. She was on the verge of a major moment—for all of us. The Christian church was born with Simon's mother-in-law.¹

When we look at the scriptures we find that the early church was full of family relationships. In recent weeks, we have seen that Jesus called two sets of brothers to follow him—Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John. Jesus had several brothers. Several women named Mary were close to Jesus and the disciples. The early church was a family affair. Even today, we sense that church life is all about relationships. You may be here today simply because of family or people close to you like family invited you to attend church with them. The church grows, and Church of the Apostles is growing and will grow, through relationships, one person at a time.

But let's get back to Simon's mother-in-law, who lay in a dangerous state, utterly helpless, dehydrated and delirious. Then Jesus came into her house—a brave and loving thing to do; a very *familiar* thing to do. He risked ritual uncleanness; risked catching her illness. It was the sort of thing a family member might do.

He took her by the hand and lifted her up. The very next sentence tells us her remarkable response. According to Mark, 'she began to serve.' The verb is *diekonei*, and it tells us that in that instant, the church began. It was Simon's mother-in-law who first responded as so many others would, profoundly moved by the great change in her life. She was the first deacon, in the sense of becoming a servant out of reciprocal love.²

She began to serve out of a sense of thanksgiving. Her life had been saved. She was so thankful to be back on her feet and life had purpose once again. The everyday tasks were transformed and became miraculous. Have you

¹ Lawrence Wood, "Living by the Word – Mark 1:29-39," *Christian Century*, January 27, 2009, 19.

² Wood, 19.

ever sensed that feeling? Peter's mother-in-law experienced what we experience when we have been sick and then feel the new energy that comes with healing.

The meal she served that night was filled with thanksgiving. It was like the meal that Martha and Mary would later serve when their brother Lazarus was brought back to life by Jesus. The meal was like the one Zacchaeus offered to Jesus when he was reclaimed as one of God's children. Can't you hear the laughter and feel the love that lasted into the wee hours of the night?

Our God wants us to know that we are cared for each day. The powerful presence of God entered that dear lady's bedroom when Jesus took her hand and helped her stand once again. The God of all Creation raised her from her sick bed and restored her life so that she could help Peter's family and free him for the work of an apostle. She could care for the family and her new role would strengthen the early church. She was raised up like an eagle.

Church history is full of women like Peter's mother-in-law who we may not know by name, but who influenced the growth of the church greatly. I thank Cathy, Dorothy, Annie, Ellen (mammy), Virginia, Marilyn and other women who helped with raising, teaching, and guiding this pastor. They could have been seen as grasshoppers jumping from one event to another, but in the eyes of God they were lifted up to soar like eagles. They soared like eagles because of their love for family and all of God's people. They were the ones who prayed in season and out of season for the welfare of God's children. They were the one who embodied the love of Jesus Christ in daily activities. You know who they are and

you have your own list. You see them at church bazaars, garage sales, and church dinners.

The essence of moving from being a grasshopper to an eagle is seen in this little story of one of these dear souls. She had just had a hip replacement and wouldn't be able to help with the church dinner.

"They're not using boxed potatoes are they?" she demanded. "The people who come expect potatoes made from scratch." "They're planning to peel potatoes all morning." I said. "And the ham? Did they get a good dry ham, or the watery kind?" Honestly, I didn't know. It was probably the same ham as always. I asked if she had always enjoyed cooking, and to my surprise, she adamantly said no, that cooking was a big chore. "Really? I thought you enjoyed this." "I don't love the potatoes," she said. "Really, young man, you should know I love Christ, and there are only so many ways a body can do that."³

Yes. How will you love Christ this week? In our serving, God wants us to soar with the eagles. Amen.

³ Wood, 19.