

Last Tuesday evening, I watched the service for Officer Brian Sicknick who was killed in the attack on our capitol on January 6th. It made me again do some critical thinking about the personal and national crises we as a people are experiencing in our present culture. We are facing this horrific pandemic, enormous pain and grief, loneliness, political unrest, racism, threats due to growing militias and white supremacist movements, and far too many people getting drawn into rabbit holes of conspiracy theories and lies. As I think about these challenges and our profound brokenness as people, my heart truly breaks. I mourn our deep brokenness. During dark times of challenge, it often seems that we as a people do not always remember God's presence in our lives. And, quite frankly, we may ask, "Where is God; has God abandoned us? Who are we as a people?" Therefore, today's scripture readings are **again so life-giving.**

The words we hear in today's reading from Isaiah were written after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. After one of the most horrific moments in Jewish history, the people are living in exile. **They** have experienced personal and national crises and their memory of God's presence to them has diminished. They do not

remember God's promises to them. Their biggest questions are, "Has God abandoned us? Are the Babylonian gods greater than our God? And who are we now as a people?" In today's reading, Isaiah repeats the rhetorical questions, "*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*" And, the answer he ultimately gives is that God has **always** been with the people, giving strength to the powerless and power to faint. During difficult times, Isaiah inspires the people to trust in something **bigger** than their present circumstances. God **is** present with them in their pain, and **they** can be present to and with one another.

Often, in times of crisis when **we** are suffering, we too forget the awesome power of God. Like the people who were in exile, this virus has tested **our** memory of God's presence to us. Because of the hardships and suffering many have faced, we collectively as a people may have forgotten what God has done for us. Isaiah's questions can and should still be asked of us today, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? God is with us!" When crisis causes us to have short memories, Isaiah's words remind us that God has been here since before the beginning of the world and God is the one who **has** been and **continues to be fully in control**. In a time when many feel and face

despair and hopelessness, Isaiah's words speak directly to **our** fears saying, "God is the creator of heaven and earth, large and vast beyond our imagining and God does **not** grow faint or weary. If you feel faint and powerless, God **will** give to you power and strength. And, as you **wait** for the Lord, you are like a molting eagle. God **will** give you strength and new wings that will lift you up. God will raise you up to life." Isaiah assures us of God's tender and empowering care.

As we look at our gospel reading, Jesus enters a place where he finds hopelessness and powerlessness. If you remember last week's gospel, Jesus had just been teaching in the synagogue. While there, he was rudely interrupted by a man possessed with an "unclean spirit." Jesus had then ordered the unclean spirit to leave this man and the man was healed. It was Jesus' **first** miracle in the gospel of Mark. And, it was an action that was all about healing and hope, empowering and enabling that man to again be restored to life and full participation within the life of community.

This morning, we find the gospel writer continuing this narrative by connecting that story to what we have as today's gospel reading. Jesus leaves the synagogue and he "immediately" goes to Simon's house where he finds Simon's mother-in-law sick with a fever. It is still the same day, the

same Sabbath, only a matter of hours later, and we find Jesus again giving life by healing Simon's mother-in-law. He walks over, touches her, then he takes her by the hand and lifts her up, or "**raises her up.**" The Greek word Mark uses for "lifted up" or "raised up" is the same word Mark uses to tell of Jesus being **lifted up** on a cross. And, it is the same word used in the gospel narrative describing Easter morning when we hear the words "He is not here, he is **risen!**" This is not coincidence. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is **raised up** from her illness. And, what does she begin to do? She gets up from her bed and begins to feed people. She begins to **serve**, to **minister to others**. **Healed** from her illness, she begins to live into a sense of purpose, a sense of vocation. This woman who has been touched and healed by Jesus becomes the first active witness to what a healed and resurrected life in Jesus looks like.

Healing, deliverance from pain and illness, **and setting people free** are the hallmarks of that great prophetic dream called the Reign of God. Isaiah and the prophets articulated the dream of God and it is expressed in one way or another as it is threaded throughout the entirety of scripture. Yet, the people had to always be reminded of that dream and **we** need to be reminded of God's dream. The dream of God is always describing a reality where **no one** goes hungry, the ill and grieving are **healed**, and

those in various kinds of prisons are **set free** to live abundant life, **life that truly matters**. Over and over, we hear that Jesus “went about healing many who were sick or possessed by demons.” Healing and setting people free were foundational to Jesus’ ministry. And, healing and setting people free are foundational to the ministry **we** share as members of the body of Christ. This image of healing and setting people free is something we share because, in baptism, we **too** have been **raised** to new life. We **too** have been set free. We **too** have been **raised** to live life that truly matters and live into the ministry of **servicing others**.

We live in a world that is desperate for healing. The need in this world is so great. And, friends, God’s healing, life giving presence is closer to us than the air we breathe. As we live together, participating in the community of faith, we live into God’s healing, gracious love. Gerald May was a medical doctor who practiced psychotherapy in Washington, D.C. He wrote of the importance of community in the healing process. He writes:

God’s grace through community involves something far greater than other people’s support and perspective. The power of **grace** is nowhere as brilliant nor as mystical as in **communities of faith**. Its power includes not just **love** that comes from people and through people but **love** that pours forth **among** people, as if through the very spaces between one person and next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power. (Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 173.)

Friends, the good news to us in the depth of our present circumstances is this: Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? God is with us! In the person of Jesus, God comes to us in the depth of our circumstances, renews our strength, brings healing. God **raises** us up to serve others and to serve the greater community as we continue to live into the dream of God for this world, as we carry God's healing presence in this world. And, **we are doing just that!** As our Caring Committee continues their outstanding work connecting to members and others in the community, we carry the good news message that God **IS** present to us and continues to be present to us and **all** others. As we begin some new food pantry projects, we carry God's message of healing love to others by connecting to people in the depth of **their** need. And, as we continue the reconciling work of caring for our neighbor and living out God's love in this community, God **will** continue to raise us up to a new life of hope, just as Jesus did to Simon's mother-in-law. God **is** raising us up, lifting us up so we can live lives of service to others and bear God's creative and life-giving, redeeming **love** in this world. And that **love**, my friends, is what truly will transform the deep brokenness and challenges of this present time.