

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany • February 4, 2018

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

“Being SJLC 2018: Called to Wait”

*Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they 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's winter. It's cold. There's a particularly nasty flu virus that's been making the rounds this year. Even if you haven't had to deal with that in your household, from what I've been hearing, there are a lot of other illness or conditions that have been giving people grief. Getting sick is no fun. Having an illness wrecks your routine; it might even change your life. And when these conditions stick around, or come back again and again like a yo-yo, that can really beat you down. But we're Christians, right? We can pray to God about these concerns. And we do. But what do we do when sickness stays, or the condition is not cured? Keep praying? You might very well start to wonder if all that praying is doing any good. You might find yourself asking, “Has God forgotten me/them/us?”

Has He?

We've been reading through the Mark's Gospel account each week in worship – you can follow along with our live webcast each Wednesday as we go through chapters at a time, too – and from what we've heard even in chapter one, Jesus is a man of action. Today, Jesus heads to Simon Peter's house. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus had just been teaching in the synagogue (and casting a demon out of a man who'd been there). He gets to the house, and Simon and his brother Andrew relay the news about Simon's mother-in-law who's burning up with a fever. Why would anyone want to stay in a place where others are sick? But what does Jesus do? He grasps her hand. He doesn't get ill; rather, the illness gets Jesus'd! The woman is instantly well, so well that she welcomes in the guests and gives them the gift of hospitality. After sundown falls and the Sabbath restrictions have lifted, the whole city comes to see Jesus, who heals the sick and casts out demons. The man of action is at work!

So why doesn't he stay there in Capernaum? Why doesn't Jesus heal everyone?

How many people saw Jesus do these amazing things – or the even more amazing acts which will follow? Hundreds? Thousands, at the very least. But what did any of those mighty works ultimately do for Jesus and his mission? The crowds that Jesus fed would grow hungry once again. The storms that he calmed would come back at some point in the future. The people that he healed would still eventually die. And almost everyone who witnessed these miracles would abandon Jesus at the end as he was betrayed and handed over to death on a cross.

Jesus always had the bigger picture in mind. The Son of God didn't come into our world simply to heal the sick, to cast our demons, or to do any of the other amazing acts that Mark reports in this Gospel. When Simon Peter and others go to find Jesus the next day, their eyes are only on the needs and the people in front of them. But God came to be with us in order to bring healing for *all* people.

As God's people in Christ, you and I are waiting for healing – ultimate healing. Jesus' healing work during his earthly ministry was a sneak preview of the victory that he came to bring into our world: his victory over sin and death. Are you sick? Are you dying? Truth be told, each of us is. Sometimes, the pain of that sickness is more pronounced. Even if you experience physical recovery, you'll still go the way of all flesh, as have princes and rulers and athletes and celebrities before us. God sent His Son to attack the problem of death head-on, to take your place in it and to give you resurrection in its stead. Because of Jesus, you can look ahead to resurrection and restoration. On the day when Christ returns you will once again be made whole, body and soul united and freed from the brokenness of sin. In this time in between, we wait.

From the sound of it in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah, the exiles in Babylon had given up on God, despondently wondering what His promises were worth: “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God.” They were far from their homeland, surrounded by a foreign nation. In their exile, they'd fallen in with the ways of their neighbors, even worshipping as gods the stars of the heavens above them. It certainly didn't seem to them like the Lord was doing anything for His people. It's as if they're asking, “Has God forgotten me?”

God's answer: No, He has not! Here in Isaiah 40, we hear God's assurance that He remembers His people. The same God who created – and calls by name! (cf. Psalm 147, too)– each of those thousands upon thousands of stars which the people saw running across the canvas of the night sky, He is the one who remembers each and every one of His beloved children. Through Isaiah, the Lord calls His people to wait upon Him.

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Waiting on the Lord isn't any ordinary waiting. It's not just passing time at the DMV or the supermarket checkout right before the Super Bowl. Waiting on the Lord is waiting in hope. The Hebrew word we read as "wait" in our congregational memory verse for the week ahead springs from the same root as the word for hope. Because of God's faithfulness, you can wait, looking ahead in hope, in expectation of what's waiting for you in the future. Called by faith, you have the assurance that the ultimate healing that Jesus brings is healing that's coming your way, too.

But how can you wait when it seems like the waiting might go on forever? "Has God forgotten me/them/us?" He hasn't – nor has he abandoned you. Jesus has promised to be with you to the end of time. He's promised to hear you whenever you come to him in prayer. You can go to him in persistent prayer, waiting confidently for the strength that you need to follow him, strength that he gives!

Look at how Jesus prayed. He rose early, departing before the busyness of the city could find him, and went out to a remote place to pray. He knew the importance of being in conversation with his Father and our Father, so as to keep his focus on the bigger picture and the real purpose of his earthly ministry. When Simon Peter and the others came looking for him, what did he tell them? It was time to move out, to deliver the good news of God's rescue to the world. You get to do that, too.

This weekend might mark the close of our Epiphany-season Being SJLC (Serving Jesus + Living in Community) emphasis, but that life together that we have in Christ never ends. Called by faith, we wait together in hope. You have hope that doesn't depend on your own strength and abilities; it doesn't even depend on your own faithfulness. It depends on Jesus. Isaiah points us to the image of waiters-on-the-Lord being hoisted up with "wings like eagles" – or the mightiest bird in the sky – given the strength and perseverance to accomplish the work before them. God does not forget His children. That's hope that someone else needs as much as you do. Wait on the Lord with them. [Missional Community preview]

Called by faith, you and I can live out our identity as God's people in Christ by *being* SJLC, serving Jesus and living in community, sharing the good news of God's rescue and reign in word, in action, and in presence. Spend time with those who wait in need, wondering if God has forgotten me/them/us. Pray for them persistently. Pray with them.

Called by faith, wait for the Lord – in hope. He remembers His people. He remembers you.

**Amen.**