

What Makes for Change?

Isaiah 40:27-31; Mark 1:29-39

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Isaiah 40:27-31:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, 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. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God 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.

Mark 1:29-39:

As soon as they 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 Jesus about her at once. Jesus 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 sunset, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for Jesus. When they found Jesus, they said, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus 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 Jesus went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

It is hard to keep up with what is happening in our day and age (as well as to not feel bombarded by repeats of major developments). With access to news from around the world, local news, and so many social media sites involving family, friends, and strangers, we are exposed to more information than any of us can process. In this context, the words of Isaiah: "Have you not heard? Have you not known?" can sound like just one more sound bite announcement, one more notification on Facebook, Tiktok, or Messenger or Instagram or whatever social media resources we use.

However, Isaiah was calling on his contemporaries to remember the most fundamental message and meaning for their lives. They had been taken into exile and were oppressed under foreign rulers. Isaiah boldly announced the fleeting and limited power of abusive rulers (40:22) in comparison with the lasting power of God's healing vision for the world. Isaiah reminded

them that the God who created them would not grow weary but give “power to the faint and strength to the powerless (40:29).” Our God employs the people to create a different future. This God is about empowering those in need – against the power of empire.

Such empowerment also lies at the heart of our Gospel passage for today.¹ Jesus manifests this work of bringing “power to the faint and strength to the weary” by tending to Simon’s mother-in-law who was gravely ill with a fever, ignoring old judgmental notions that illness is a punishment and touching her would render him impure. He takes her by the hand and raises her up just like he would be raised up at Easter.² Jesus thus manifests the urgent and incarnating presence of God who meets people where they are and restores them to community and wholeness. She, in turn, claims this wholeness and empowerment and responds by doing what she can to serve within her community.

The urgency of what God is doing through Jesus is mirrored by the urgency and care shown by the community plays an integral part in God’s healing work for good or ill. People have taken notice of Jesus and are carrying those who cannot walk to him. They accompany those who are burdened and feeling broken. The whole city is gathered as one, the text says. There are potent destructive forces at work in their midst, and those who are the most sensitive and vulnerable are hounded by these destructive presences the most. Jesus faces these forces and strips them of their power. Then he goes to a quiet place to pray, regroup, and refuel while the urgency to seek his help only intensifies and expands.³ His friends come hunting for him, saying that everyone is looking for him. They feel overwhelmed and don’t yet know how to handle all this need and energy but Jesus says that they must move on and spread the same message further.

¹ Jesus had just illegally cast out a disempowering spirit from a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath day of rest. He showed that healing people is God’s primary concern over upholding institutions. People took notice.

² The Greek verb *egeiro*, translated as Jesus “raising” Simon’s mother-in-law, is the same used to describe Jesus’ own resurrection later (Mark 16:6).

³ Stripped of all the exterior markers of identity and self-made safety, he gives himself to being present to the “ground of his own being,” to God. This is the heart of prayer. In prayer, Jesus offers himself to receive what sustains him, to offer up what touches him, to connect himself with the womb of God’s love as though through an umbilical cord. What he yearns for and wishes to share with us does not lie without but is already present within in the sense that we are never actually disconnected from God and each other. We only think we are.

As we heard in recent weeks, this message entails both a call to change our consciousness and a visionary message of the coming of God's alternative kingdom - a kinship grounded in justice, wholeness, and love. Jesus does not want to be a stationary saint or a figure on a pedestal, adored from a safe distance, especially if that ends up disempowering others.⁴ He is building a movement of people who seek to experience this new realm and to trust that God is already at work, embracing and empowering them.

It is important that there are so many healing stories of particular people within their communities because we all live life in particular context. We are a community in this time and place. We care about the fact that that it is Melvin's birthday today, Mort Strom passed on just two days ago, and that Roy is having shoulder surgery on Tuesday. We also face destructive forces which oppress people in our society and world, ultimately affecting all of us. Depression, mass incarceration, the number of unhoused people, gun violence, opioid addiction are among the symptoms which reflect a greater social malaise. This is not about individual failure. Rather, we are dealing with collective partial blindness and broad acquiescence to accepting the status quo of the empire of power and money that drives our world – and our nation.

Ursula K. LeGuin wrote a haunting story/allegory called "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" which powerfully illustrates this point. (It was shared as part of my eco-spiritual direction program). It is too long to tell in all its detail but let me highlight potent aspects. LeGuin paints the picture of a summer festival in a seemingly beautiful seaside city called *Omelas*. At first, we hear about the beautiful mountains, the ocean, sparkling boats in the harbor, and beautiful houses. People move about freely. We are told there is no need for clergy, soldiers, kings, stock markets, slavery, or soldiers. People, for the most part, don't even experience guilt. They seem to know joy. There is a hint of cheerful sweetness in the air and sounds of festival music. We hear of preparations for a picnic and horse race (or should I say

⁴ That is why the demons cannot speak his identity out loud and why he and his students will move on to other towns. If the demons keep calling him the Son of God, others may become too enamored and worship him as an external idol.

Toboggan Championship?). The citizens of *Omela* seem to live tranquil lives and even people from further away stream into the city of seeming happiness for the festival.

However, as the story continues, painful truths are revealed. In the basement of a splendid public building is a tiny room, not bigger than a broom closet. It contains mops and cleaning materials. It is also the room where the community keeps its scapegoat or innocent sacrificial lamb. There is a child there who has been stripped of light, comfort, love, and care for so long that the child has become a shell of its former wild, inquisitive, and beautiful self. There is little contact when someone shoves a bowl of water and food inside the door on occasion. The child sometimes calls out: "I will be good. Please let me out" but there is never an answer.

At a certain age, youth are brought in to see the child and initiated into the story that the fact that the child is kept locked away ensures the peace and well-being of the community. Adults come by sometimes as well. Some are plagued with sadness for a while. Some even feel anger and rage but, in time, go back to their daily lives, perhaps a bit more subdued and uneasy. They feel powerless to change the story or they give into the justification given that things must remain as they are. However, some who go to see the child do not return to the community. They head toward a new horizon even if it means walking through darkness for a time. LeGuin writes: "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

This story has been haunting me because I believe it names that our society turns a blind eye to the suffering of the most vulnerable and of those who try to resist to uphold a system of seeming well-being for others. I have been reading the book *Poverty, by America* by Matthew Desmond which is central to the series of workshops Jonathan Frost is leading right now. [It is not too late to join. If you cannot, please read the book.] It is a tour de force of stories and data that opens the door of the closet of oppression in our society and world (described by LeGuin). It also implicates especially those of us who are privileged participants in our unjust economic

and social system which does not need to function as it does, no matter what we are told to the contrary. We are not only implicated in the ravages of climate change but, as Desmond writes, greater dynamisms which, among other things, keep enriching the well to do and exploiting the poor.

Let me just share one brief example from the book about a young man named Julio. Julio came from Guatemala on a work visa and settled in California. In 2014, he started working two full-time jobs at minimum wage. He worked the graveyard shift at MacDonalD's, then rested at home for two hours. He also worked for a temp agency and would then go to a shift wherever he was sent for the day. Julio loaded up on soda and coffee to stay awake. He felt like "a zombie" and was always tired. He was supporting his mom and two younger siblings, and they lived in a single unfurnished room together. It was all they could afford despite his 80 hours of work per week. Julio was gone most of the time. One day, his then eight-year-old brother, Alexander, told him that he was saving money and asked: "I want to buy one hour of your time." Julio broke down and wept. Shortly after that, he fainted from exhaustion in the aisle of a grocery store. He was only twenty-four.

Julio recovered and eventually joined a movement for fair wages which ultimately succeeded in raising the state's minimum wage. He was very nervous when he participated in his first strike but heartened by the community effort. By 2019, Julio was able to work less, sleep more, and spend more time with family. It is a story of what is possible when people rise up and resist together. If you'd like to learn more about the stock market and stockholder's role in resisting such change, please read the book.⁵ All this is hard to swallow, hard to face. We can make important differences in addressing injustice when we do come together and are willing to pay the price of our own privilege if we have it.

⁵ The book also points out that companies often lose stock value when they pay workers more because it hurts the stockholder's bottom line, and many pull out because of their bottom-line goal of acquiring profit at any cost to labor. I need to add this because many of us hold stock. We hold stock together as a church and are implicated in whatever aspects of our economic system are unjust, often without knowing it or wanting to know.

This work is important, but there is another important message here. We also must dare to live forward into a reality not yet fully realized and invest our energy in what we know to be the dream of God. The people in our story who left *Omela* already knew about it. Jesus called it the realm of God. Here, no one is asked to carry undue and unjust burdens so that others can thrive. No one needs to be ignored, diminished, or hidden away so life can go on as usual when the world is actually on fire. Here, we search for the power of God alive in us and pray for the spirit to guide us into mutual and equal aid and service. Here, everyone's dignity is upheld. Here, the joy of one is the joy of all and the sorrow of one is the sorrow of all. Here, the wild beauty of our hearts and minds and of all of creation is cherished and not turned into a commodity.

People of God, God is not done with us yet. As we soon enter the season of reflection of Lent, let us face into difficult truths and daunting challenges together. Let us remember the power of God to change and empower us. Let us trust that, by the power of God, we will mount up "with wings like eagles, [we] shall run and not be weary, [we] shall walk and not faint (40:31)." We may have to die to some of what we have taken for granted or ignored. By the grace of God, we can also risk the renewing and transformative power of resurrection, even if we do not yet fully know what it will look like. Let us journey together toward that horizon, trusting that God will be with us on the way. Thanks be to God.