

**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 2.4.24
Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-11, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39**

In Mark, Jesus's work begins with healings. Many healings. Big healings, little healings, some specified, most not. But Jesus's healing work isn't the first healing in the gospel. In Mark, nothing really begins until Jesus hears that he is beloved. It happens when he is being baptized. Jesus goes into the river and, in that moment with water flowing around, the heavens open and a voice speaks, "You are beloved." Jesus actually doesn't do or say anything in this oldest gospel until he has heard those words that he is beloved. The foundation of all is acknowledging belovedness and being in beloved relationship. Perhaps Jesus' full sense of being whole in the God of all creation came in that moment of experiencing belovedness. The meaning of healing is so expansive: healthy, holy, whole—it's no surprise that those words are all connected and all emanate from a starting place of belovedness, because after that, the healings began. And people gathered around to watch. The whole city, as the story goes, gathered around the door. Trying to peer in. Trying to jostle their way in. When Simon and his companions found him (taking a prayer break in the desert), that's exactly what they said, "Everyone is looking for you." Everyone knew they were seeing something extraordinary.

Last Sunday, at our combined service before the Annual Meeting, Frank presented us all with an Ebenezer, otherwise known as a Stone of Help, based on the ancient story of the prophet Samuel. Marking places with stones as a way of recognizing that God has been present in a particular moment in a particular time is an ancient practice that goes way back to the earliest of times and continues to this day. Cairns on trails or at the beach are commonly seen here on Whidbey, marking the way or a place for a particular reason. Our Ebenezer, specially designed and painted by Carole Tyson, is a recognition of the many ways God has been present and faithful to this community over the past few years. Frank recounted some of the ways he has seen God present and active and faithful in this place over the past few years. And I don't know about you, but that sermon made me watchful this week, to what is happening right here, right now. Very much like how the whole town (Capernaem) in the gospel today was suddenly watchful because of all the healings. Minds whirring with these sorts of questions: where in this place, or in life, or in the world have you seen God's healing presence, healing actions, healing faithfulness this very week? Where in this place, or in your own life, or in the world have you seen relationships restored this very week?

I have one Healing God-sighting that happened in Oregon. First, the backstory: a couple of months ago, we started using the blue hymnals to sing a hymn or two (at the 10:30 and combined services), in part to save a page of paper with each bulletin, to participate (in a small way) in the healing of the environment by using less paper. In part to open up this rich resource right there, in the rack in front of us. Ushers noted that we didn't have enough hymnals to go around, even if we are sharing (which is always a good thing to do). So before buying new hymnals (at \$24.45 / book), I contacted the Diocese of Olympia and the Diocese of Oregon to see if they had any leads on where we might find some. Almost immediately, I heard back from the

Diocese of Oregon that a church in Southeast Portland had recently closed and they might have some hymnals they were no longer using.

I connected with the priest of this recently closed church, the Rev. Sara Fischer, and back in December, Sara packed up their hymnals and held them for us until they could be picked up. On Friday morning, on my way back up to Whidbey (after a really quick trip to see my family—healing for me!), I drove through Southeast Portland to meet her. The church is in a neighborhood that has definitely seen better days. The weeds in the parking lot were thriving, but everything else looked pretty tired. Sara greeted me, as did Joe, who was very cheerful and willing to lift the heavy boxes of books.

I learned a little bit more. The church, Saints Peter and Paul, held its final services on the First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2023. Church members realized a few years ago that their building was not in great shape and they discerned that they weren't being called to repair the building. In fact, on Friday, when I asked if I might go into the bathroom before continuing north on I-5, Sara shook her head and said, "The plumbing isn't working. We had a flood." I don't know how long ago the flood happened. Sometime ago (pre-pandemic), they shifted their focus from repairing the building to creating housing on the church site for the many houseless folks who live in the neighborhood. The project was started quite a few years ago, then it stalled for a few years. It's now moving forward again, in collaboration with the Diocese of Oregon. So a lot of their work to heal houselessness in the neighborhood has involved uncertainty and actively waiting on others to sign on to the project.

Given that the church had been dissolved, I asked Sara what else they were up to. She said that on Sunday mornings, about 5-8 people who formerly came on Sundays now meet at a different church each week for worship. Calling themselves *The Continuing Community of Saints Peter & Paul*, they see themselves as an itinerant apostolic community, going to neighboring churches—like Jesus traveling around proclaiming the message of healing and restoration in today's gospel—to be the church in the community. A lot like Peter and Paul, in fact. Sara said they are about to start (or have started) a prayers and pizza night on Sunday evenings. For that, the church will be open to anyone in the neighborhood who wants to gather, eat, pray, and study the Bible together. Since many people in that neighborhood are marginally housed or houseless, Sara said, "When you don't have a house to go to at the end of the day, it actually matters that we meet here, inside, as a community." (Quotes are from my memory.) They don't have working toilets right now, but they have a sacred place where they gather and experience the presence of God—healing and holy. The church building might not be open anymore, but they are, as a community.

Richard Rohr has written, *To finally surrender ourselves to healing, we have to have three spaces opened up within us - and all at the same time: our opinionated head, our closed-down heart, and our defensive and defended body. That is the summary work of spirituality—and it is indeed work. Yes, it is also the work of "a Power greater than ourselves," and it will lead to a great luminosity and depth of seeing. That is why true faith is one of the most holistic and free actions a human can perform. It leads to*

such broad and deep perception that most traditions would just call it "light." (Richard Rohr, Radical Grace)

As we were talking, Sara saw a young woman walking by, and immediately shouted her name and left our parking lot conversation to catch the woman. She came back to say goodbye to me and apologized for running off by saying that the young woman's mom had died two days ago of an overdose. She said that she had been waiting, hoping to see her. As I drove out of the parking lot, she was back with the young woman, their heads close. It looked like they were praying, exchanging deep grief with one another. Human to human, heads, hearts, bodies open to one another. Speaking the language of belovedness. There is nothing more holy. More healing.

That's who has held these hymnals that we now hold: all the beloved who, over the years, have made their way to Saints Peter and Paul for prayer and a slice of pizza and maybe a slice of hope, who have sung fiercely, in good times and tough times. Their singing is now part of our singing. We are now connected. In fact, maybe the first thing to check whenever you pick up one of the hymnals is to open the front flap to see what church's name is there. If it's St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods, pray for this community, for us to be alert and watchful, fully open to God in our midst. If it is Saints Peter and Paul, pray for that apostolic community that is mostly out on the streets, a church that has no working indoor plumbing right now, but who still gathers for prayers in the parking lot or on Sunday nights or in other churches. Just as Jesus healed and then said, *We are going to the neighboring town so that we may proclaim the message*, they proclaimed the message to me and I now pass it on to you that Jesus is alive and well here at St. A.'s, but also in Southeast Portland. What about you: where in this place, in your own life, or in the world did you see God's healing presence, healing actions, healing faithfulness this week? And, as we look ahead to this upcoming week, where will you see relationships restored, the holy, healing Spark of the Universe present and at work?