

Epiphany 5, February 4, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-12, 21c, 1 Cor. 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

Our readings today are an invitation for us to look beyond the immediacy and presence of our individual moments and look at life from a wider perspective. We're being reminded that our individual stories are each a part of a greater narrative that's the story of God and our universe. "Here's the big picture," the readings say, "and here's where you fit in it."

Isaiah offers a truly majestic, awe-inspiring overview of the vast infinity of both the universe, and its Creator. In comparison, we're just bugs on the windshield! I suppose that could be a depressing view of our lot in life, but Isaiah says not. The infinite God is, for him, a source of confidence and hope. Nothing's too big or too small for the God of the universe, who not only directs the galaxies but also inspires our own lives through the divine gifts of strength, energy, and wisdom. "God's lively energy flows in and through [all of] us, providing us with all the resources we need to flourish" as faithful people in our time and in every time; in this place and in every place.

That's Isaiah's message. His vision of an infinite God and a finite humanity is, I think, an invitation to us to take our lives seriously but not too seriously, to see that who we are and what we do is important but not all important. "*Much depends on our agency, but not everything. God is the beginning and end of all things; so we can work hard and also rest in God's abiding care.*" (Epperly) We all leave a mark; we're all remembered by God; we all in some way shape the future. And we are and do all these things because we're all partners with the cosmic God who sustains and guides us. We're all a part of a much bigger story. It's a reminder to me and you – to all of us – to stay away from the grandiosity that can lead us to claim to be the center of the universe. And it's a reminder to me and to you – to all of us – to stay away from an abject surrender that denies the importance of each of us as a human being among other human beings.

The psalmist also goes "Big Picture," talking about God's grandeur, linking that vision of God with the practicalities of a faith-filled life: it's all about sustaining the people and healing the broken-hearted. As part of that healing and sustaining the psalmist also talks about justice: lifting up the lowly, gathering those exiled. And – though we might easily miss it – the psalmist notes in that context that God is unimpressed with – and the translation allows for saying that God rejects – the machinery of war and those who believe that "might is right." We should not invest ourselves in "the might of a horse....the strength of a man. "*The force that guides the heavens also insures justice and well-being in human life*" while rejecting violence. "*Embracing God's energy of love energizes our lives and transforms the world.*" (Bruce Epperly).

Paul's words are also "big picture." The central message of Jesus – about salvation and about wholeness – trumps every theological and ideological claim. No matter what you might have believed, or believe still, about God, life, the universe – everything; no matter what political perspective you embraced – or still embrace; they're all now secondary to, and contingent on Jesus' core message. Everything must be filtered through Jesus' identity and proclamation. In practical terms, we're being told that a central tool in presenting the Good News about Jesus is flexibility; a broad, comprehensive embrace of others who are seeking to make equally authentic

journeys into the heart of God – whether they call God Yahweh or Allah or any other name. In the end, for Paul, what truly matters isn't our parochial viewpoint but God's glorious vision of love and healing and wholeness which embraces all the diversities of life.

And that brings us directly to today's Gospel. Mark here uses a familiar literary device, "A day in the life of.....", a sample day that epitomizes each day, a slice of Jesus' life. Jesus goes from dawn to dusk. He shares in personal community then shares himself with the broader community. He teaches, heals, exorcises a demon. No healing – and so no one – is too large or too small, too important or too unimportant, for his attention. And then he seeks solitude for prayer, which connects him with God and gives him a clear sense of mission.

Of course, the tricky part – the distracting part – of the passage is one word: "demons." Think avarice, self-centered values, greed; think of those who've lost their way, whose words and actions reflect the collapse of a moral universe. The point is the completeness of Jesus' healing, his gift of being able to make people whole, and that part of his day takes on a more contemporary meaning for us.

Think of "demons" this way, then let go of them. They're for another time. The big picture here is about the whole day, and how it all fits together, how each part complements each other part. Most obviously, I think, it's a reminder to us that we're not to polarize action and contemplation. Our mission as people of faith isn't sharply bounded as either political or spiritual, as either activist or contemplative. Our mission is always both. Mark here reminds us through this "day in the life of Jesus" that ***action and contemplation are interdependent***. That's most obvious in today's gospel passage when we see that Jesus' quiet time fortifies his sense of calling to all Israel – and implicitly the whole world – and not merely about a village called Capernaum, where he now is. The inward-facing contemplative identity of Jesus is what allows for the outward-facing mission of Jesus. ***It's the same with us***. The Big Picture inspires patience with tasks undone and gives us faith that the moral arc of history aims at goodness, despite many setbacks on the way

So this is a "big picture" day! We're invited to reflect on the nature of creation and the Divine, and see both the amazing grandeur and also the gentle intimacy of God.

And we're not only reminded to live out our stories in both action and contemplation, we're also reminded that in the way that we live out our stories – by our actions or inactions, by our decisions or hesitations – we add beauty or ugliness to our communities and – implicitly – to all of creation. Prayer matters, and so does action; the fact of prayer and the nature of action also matters. So be prayerful in all you do, and act for the kingdom in the best way you know how!