

**First United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Lectionary Study Guide**

For use the week of February 1-7, 2021

5th Sunday after the Epiphany

February 7, 2021

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 40:21-31

^{40:21} Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; ²³ who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. ²⁵ To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. ²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹ He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹ 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.

Commentary

Jerusalem was razed and sacked by Babylonian soldiers in 587 B.C. The Temple was destroyed, and the leaders of the community were taken to Babylon. The exiles thought that God had abandoned them, saying "my way is hidden from the Lord." Isaiah 40:27 may be a fragment of communal lament, similar to complaints against God found in some psalms in the Book of Lamentations. The memory of the forced march to Babylon may be implied in the phrase "the youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted" (verse 30). Second Isaiah tells the people they can count on God to save them because God created the whole world. God "stretches out the heavens like a curtain." Moreover, God controls the heavenly host and can call out the stars by name. If they keep the faith and wait for God to act, says the prophet, God will renew their strength.

Reflection

Have you ever felt abandoned by God? What word, sign, act, or relationship has helped you overcome these feelings and recover your confidence in God's presence and power?

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

^{9:16} If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. ¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Commentary

This passage comes in the middle of Paul's argument with the Corinthians about material support for him and Barnabas. Other apostles, soldiers, vinedressers, shepherds, and priests all got paid for their labor. Yet Paul made no claim for anything from the Corinthians. Why? Did Paul like being a martyr? No, he wanted to remove every obstacle to belief in the gospel in case some hearers assumed he was preaching for personal gain. Besides, if he had a choice, he might claim some reward. Paul extends the imagery to describe his relationship to those he hopes to win for Christ: He is their slave as well. Here he echoes the words of Jesus from Mark 10:44: "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Reflection

Describe Paul's relationship to the Corinthian church. What had he given up for them? What did he expect from them? What can we expect from our church leaders? What do we owe them?

Mark 1:29-39

^{1:29} As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and

she began to serve them. ³² That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ He 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." ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Commentary

The Gospel of Mark is a story of intense struggle between Jesus and the power of evil. When Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of fever, the demonstration of his power continued. By nightfall of the Sabbath, when people were free to travel, the whole city was at the door. This passage summarized representative scenes from Jesus' early ministry. By using words such as all, whole, many, everyone, Mark stresses the immediate and broad impact Jesus had in Galilee. Jesus insisted that he was more than a miracle worker; he had "come out" to proclaim the good news of God's reign. "Come out" has multiple meanings: Jesus had come out from his hometown of Nazareth (geography); he had disclosed who he was (identity); and he had come from God into the world (origin). His full identity was to remain hidden, however: He commanded the demons to be silent.

Reflection

Jesus could not allow others to name him if he was to retain his integrity and power. To what extent do you allow others to name, and thereby define and limit, who you are?

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

^{147:1} Praise the LORD!

How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

² **The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.**

³ He heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.

⁴ **He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.**

⁵ Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.

⁶ **The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.**

- ⁷ Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
- ⁸ He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
- ⁹ **He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.**
- ¹⁰ His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
- ¹¹ **but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.**

^{147:20c} **Praise the LORD!**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.