

Sermon on Mark 1:29-39 & Isaiah 40:21-31  
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany, February 4, 2018  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
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One of my favorite new commercials on television is the one that starts with its focus on a young woman in a sundress, smiling and lounging in her backyard. The focus slowly begins to enlarge, and we see where she is laying, and as the camera goes up into the sky, we look down on a larger picture of the yard, the house, the neighborhood, then the city, then the state of California, then the North American continent from above, and finally, from far up in the cosmos, we are looking down at the planet earth, and then the solar system, and finally the Milky Way galaxy. It's all done with a camera lens, showing us the macro view from a far away galaxy looking down upon planet Earth, down to the micro view of one human being reclining on the surface of this tiny planet. It's all a lesson on perspective – from that of a person standing next to this one single human being, or from that of God high above in the heavens, a galaxy far, far away. So how do we look at things that happen around us in our lives, from our own perspective or from that of God? Do we see the universal big picture, or only the minutiae of what affects you and me, individually?

So we heard today two different lessons from Isaiah and from Mark, which offer us two dramatically different perceptions of what goes on in the universe, and with us human beings in this world. Two views: from God's perspective, and from our own. The first is from the prophet Isaiah, speaking to people who have lived in exile – looking for hope when so much seems hopeless in their situation – by telling them to consider the world from God's point of view. Here we hear Isaiah describe the same picture we saw in the television commercial:

*“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? It is God 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; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothings....To whom will you compare me or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing....Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth!”*

This was an especially helpful passage for the people of Judah to hear, as they lived in exile, feeling powerless under the authority of foreign rulers. Their exile would not be forever. The rulers of Babylon would not hold their power

forever. One day they would be set free from bondage and return home. Because the Lord God had the ultimate say, over and above those puny rulers of earth, who think they are something. *“He 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 will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

Today we may feel helpless as human beings, with all that goes on in this world that we seem to have no power to resist or affect. Injustice that infuriates us, changes that we can't stop from occurring. Power - that we don't have, which others may hold over us, and others. But comfort comes in the promise that God alone holds the true power, for God has created the whole universe, and still cares about you and me. Earthly rulers, presidents and kings, are nothing in comparison. The question for us is how we as human beings can tap into this divine power. Is it through prayer? By faith? By relationship? This is the mystery.

Mark's gospel gives us another glimpse of God's power, seen in Jesus' power to heal an individual human being who is sick. We have seen how God recognized Jesus as God's Son in baptism, giving Jesus authority to teach the meaning of God's Word and the power to command unclean spirits to come out of the persons they afflicted. All this power - so much to do - and next we see how Jesus still stopped inside the house of his new disciple Peter's mother-in-law. She was in bed with a fever, unable to welcome Jesus as her guest with her customary hospitality, immobilized. As soon as Jesus heard about her illness, Jesus came at once to her side, took her by the hand, and lifted her up. *Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.* She offered them hospitality; her strength renewed. Then everyone in the town heard about what Jesus had done, and they all came to the door, bringing their sick or those possessed with demons, looking for him. Jesus healed many, and cast out every demon, who did not dare to speak. Then he went out to all the towns in Galilee, proclaiming the good news.

From our personal experience, we also know the powerlessness that comes with illness or injury. Even a common cold or the flu can render us immobile, unable to go to work or to school, to drive, or provide for our family. It can come in a moment. One evening last winter I was with my wife, helping our daughter clean her new house. One moment I was stepping out the front door, with a vacuum cleaner in hand, the job done, loading up to go home. The next moment I was flat on my back, unable to get up, having slipped on the ice on her front steps. I eventually crawled into the back seat of our van, and she drove me to the hospital. Eventually it turned out okay - my fractured tailbone healed in six weeks - but in that moment on the ground, who knew? I experienced what so many do, when illness or injury makes us vulnerable and powerless. Then we hope and pray for the healing that will bring us back to what we knew. Sometimes it's simple,

but sometimes it can be miraculous when and if it happens – like the difference between a common cold or a cure for cancer. Nothing is guaranteed; the smallest injury can be fatal, and people can recover from the greatest injury. We pray to God to heal us, to see us in our suffering, to help us up when we fall. We may be angry with God for not noticing us, or thank God for bringing us healing and hope. We are most accustomed to seeing our hopes fall short, for healing doesn't always come – and in the end, everyone of us dies. But sometimes we experience a healing that gives all of us hope. Like we celebrated last week, when we blessed Adam for the healing he experienced as he became cancer free, and we all gave thanks. Like a few months ago when we thanked God for keeping Michael safe in sanctuary, for receiving his work visa, a job and an apartment. We celebrate those small victories, even as we see so many suffer from cancer and so many arrested or deported by immigration. It's like how we rejoice in the few examples of courage we see in the face of bullying, the moments of faithful resistance to racial injustice and the abuse of political power. Because this is how God changes the world!

So there is a macro view of the good and evil which exist in this world, the work of God's power against that of the Devil, angels versus demons, and where we fit in as human beings amidst it all. We see the forces of politics arrayed and in battle against each other, and we don't see how we can affect the outcome. It's all too big to resist or to move, in the macro view. But then, there is a place for the micro, in the details, where you and I fit in as individual persons, to disrupt evil and do what is good, for God and neighbor.

This coming week there are local precinct caucuses throughout Minnesota. You and I as individuals can go to our local precinct caucus and become delegates who will pass resolutions and nominate candidates for state and national office, for governor, for senator, of any political party. It starts in local high schools and churches, at the micro level, and moves on eventually to effect state and national elections, movements and issue campaigns, the macro level. You and I can each participate as we wish to move the faith agenda we are proposing in Isaiah, out of our own faith communities, which will help every person in our communities and state thrive. With health care for all, housing that is affordable, equal opportunities for education, employment at living wages, justice instead of jail, a welcome home instead of walls and deportation for immigrants. This is the great vision of God's mercy and justice that we see, which many say is an impossible dream – except through faith, hard work, and patient hope. We have power through prayer and in our faith in God – which gives us the courage to stand with our Muslim and Jewish neighbors as well as undocumented immigrants. This is how the demons that afflict us in society today will be cast out. Because God is an everlasting God, who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. To us, his name is Jesus. We follow him, and he gives us life. Thanks be to God!

The prophet Isaiah said:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon us, because the Lord has appointed us,  
To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Today we commission our ISAIAH faith delegates, who will go to their local precinct caucuses, and claim our moral and faith voice in the political realm. By participating as citizens, we have the power to shape the issues most important to us: in criminal justice, housing, education, employment and immigration. These faith delegates are committed to bring ISAIAH’s faith agenda to public decision making from party caucuses to district and state conventions in 2018, in the political party they choose. Today we bless them, and pray for their courage and commitment in this endeavor. We also pray for all those who will support them as delegate supporters, who help them achieve their goals to bring our faith agenda forward.

So, faith delegates and their supporters: having offered yourselves in this public ministry of this congregation, will you follow our Lord’s example of humble service, and give public witness of God’s justice in our community, state, and in the world? If so answer,  
Yes with God’s help.” **Yes, with God’s help.**

Let us pray,  
Almighty God, for all who offer themselves in your name, we give thanks. Give them joy of service, courage and guidance. Help us all to be both willing servants and bold witnesses to your good news of grace and justice for all people, that your name be glorified, and all your people live in peace and harmony, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.