

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 7, 2021

Year B RCL

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; Mark 1:29-39

“Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?”

By: The Rev. Fr. Fabian Villalobos

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” This is the beginning of our first lesson today and in it, the prophet Isaiah expresses his disbelief for the way that the people doubt about the presence of God. The creation is perfectly designed and showing God’s manifestation of power and care for *all* that exists. Isaiah recognizes the magnificence of God in his creation, “It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain”. Chapter 40 of Isaiah is addressed to the people of Israel who live in exile and are tired and weary to the point of becoming hopeless and avoid imagining a future. For some of them, the long exile is passing a toll on their faith and they doubt about God’s existence and presence with them. In reading this page of the Old Testament it is inevitable to recognize that there are similarities with

today's pandemic situation on how some people are living their faith and feel weary to imagine a better tomorrow.

Especially when hardships and distress are around us, we discover that the Bible message is clear about God being always present even if it is sometimes difficult to see his presence when we are tired and coping with daily obstacles. In that sense, we are not any different from the people of Israel who lived in exile and found it difficult to continue waiting for God's intervention. To them and to us, the prophet Isaiah words are more than an encouraging invitation: "Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?" because we know that the answer is God; Isaiah mentions that the Creator is an everlasting God. This means that while in exile or pandemic, God continues being present, and the deliverance of this or any tribulation is according to his wisdom, "He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable."

The invitation to wait and persevere in God would bring a reward that only the Creator can offer: "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." This poetry of promises guarantees a future that is accessible to those of steadfast faith who seek and rely on God. They will receive the energy, the strength and renewal to keep going in life. Instead,

those who depend on and trust in themselves eventually grow weary, and they become tired to the point of doubting and denying God's presence.

To move forward, we like the Israelites in exile need the strength that first the Creator can provide. His power to give life and renewal continues to give hope for all who believe and obey even with weariness and doubt. It is quite clear, that only God has the capacity to support the present reality of each situation and deliver a future that is rather impossible to imagine for humans.

A clear example of restoration, new strength, and energy is found today also in the gospel of Mark. After entering the house of Simon and Andrew (with James and John) they told him that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus "came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." It is especially significant that the first person to receive the healing from Jesus in Mark's gospel is a woman. It shows God's preference for the people who in society were somehow discriminated.

The fact that Jesus took her by the hand and "lift her up" displays the verb "raised" that is used also in the narratives of the resurrection in Mark's gospel. This is the first time of what will be many in this gospel where we will encounter that Jesus' action is showing power in healing. This person was not

in the ordinary life due to the illness, and Jesus in taking and raising her up is manifesting the renewal of life that we hear from the prophet Isaiah.

Once she is healed, she began to serve them. We can imagine that she was grateful and wants to be a good host and offer them some food. What is necessary to recognize is that from exclusion for illness, she passes to be a server, each encounter with God is restoration and inclusion. In a male orientated society in which this event mistakenly happens, we can associate domestic service with women duties. But even here, the gospel of Mark shows a unique insight, the verb used to describe that she began to serve them is *diakonein* diakonia (Service). The service is the response in faith to the recognition, intervention, and presence of God. This concept of Diakonia is the same we have for our Diaconal ministry, and one of the characteristics of the Christian ministry and discipleship of each baptized. Diakonia is the expression that Jesus also uses to describe his purpose, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45)

The strength from God and the service to others go hand and hand. We like Simon’s mother-in-law are “raised up” each day to serve others, and to live the

present in obedience knowing that our future is in God the Creator that “does not faint or grow weary”. Amen.