

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. 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.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Isaiah 40:21-31

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 the One 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 nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when God blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

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

The One who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name;
because God is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

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’?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

God does not faint or grow weary;
God’s understanding is unsearchable.

God 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 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.

Dusk to Dawn Miracles

Intro: Several weeks back, I had one of those days when I drove out of Saskatoon before the sun was up and returned after the sun was down. That isn’t saying much because dawn wasn’t until after 9 and dusk came by 5—one of our short winter days. Getting in and out of the city was harrowing. Heaven help you if you can actually find a proper lane on the sludge covered, line eroded, commuter infested main drag in or out of downtown! It was like a NASCAR oval that morning. Three lanes of traffic jockeying for better position with no sense of propriety or courtesy. All this taking place under dark cloak of winter. Clearly it annoyed me.

The trip back in was not much better. Something was going on at Prairie Land Park and my exit just east of the river was a confused parking lot awaiting a several car mash up. Exhaust fumes created an atmosphere akin to a fog saturated graveyard. Again, no discernable lines on the road. Again, all of this taking place under the cover of night. I was tired of the dark. I was tired of the uncertainty on the roads. I like and yet resent my car—a necessary evil I say. I just wanted to be safe at home. Don’t we all?

In such a frame of mind I began looking at the scripture texts for this Sunday. Sensitized to illumination and the absence of it, the day and night references in our scripture texts jumped out at me. At “**sunset**” people of the community gather at the home of Simon Peter, Andrew and their mother to receive healing. Sometime before daybreak, “**while it was still very dark**”, Jesus goes out to pray. The time marker of Isaiah 40 is almost certainly at night time—God tells the people to look up at the sky and at what is up there—who do you think created these?, God asks (v.26)—those objects likely being the **night time** stars. Our Isaiah

40 passage also references the “**way being hidden**”, as if it is a night walk with no moon. From this personal and scriptural platform, a sermon needed to unfold.

One of my “go to” structures for preaching is a simple formula. There is trouble in the text; there is trouble in our world. There is good news, hope, grace in the text; there is hope in our world. That form will serve the function for today.

There is Trouble in the Text: The trouble from today’s Mark reading starts after worship has finished. Actually, it began that Saturday at a synagogue with Jesus confronting an “unclean spirit”. Wow that must have been some worship service! Following this scintillating action, Jesus tags along with Peter and Andrew back to their house to get a bite to eat before enjoying the rest of the Sabbath. But there is no food on the table. Mom is not well. She has a fever. The ancients would have immediately understood this “to have a demonic cause”.¹ Trouble in the text #1.

The demonic woes continue as the sun sets and the afflicted of Capernaum descend upon the house of Peter, Andrew, and their mother to receive healing. In the larger scope of this section we have layers of society infected with oppressive spirits: the religious system, homes of disciples, the complete town of Capernaum for goodness sake. The text says the “whole city was gathered around the door”. Later in Mark’s gospel we learn that the infection is, in fact, present in the highest echelons of the religious establishment in Jerusalem and also in the political structures of the Roman Empire. And that story is as true today as it was in the first century. There is also trouble in our text from Isaiah.

At the beginning of this month (Jan 2024), I described the setting of Isaiah 40-55, that it is a section within the whole book of Isaiah devoted to consolation of a grief laden spiritual broken people.² God’s chosen ones are in a foreign land where they speak a different language, they eat different foods, they have different holidays, they tell them what to do, they tell them where to go and how fast. They feel scorched like dry grass; faded like drought-stricken flowers; unable to find a way in the dark. Too many people can empathize with these emotions.

There is Trouble in Our World: I think about these troubles in the text when I observe circumstances around me and sometimes within me. Doctors and journalists in Gaza disappear under the not so gentle escort of the Israeli Occupation Forces while hungry and homeless residents of Gaze get soaked in driving rain storms. In grief and anger, some Palestinians respond with relatively small acts of violence towards those occupying their territories and sometimes in

¹ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 144.

² See my Epiphany sermon of January 7, 2024. 2nd Isaiah source is R.N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* in the “Old Testament Guides” series (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield England, 1995), pp 1-7.

Israel proper—still not savory. Across the Black Sea, Russian drones regularly reduce Ukrainian infrastructure to rubble in various parts of their country.

But we don't need to look way over there to find trouble in our world. As I have been writing this sermon the inquest for the violence in and out of the James Cree 1st Nation has been taking place. A drug induced demonic rampage leaves people dead, a 1st Nation further damaged emotionally, and first responders traumatized. All with a Province and Country largely detached from the pain.

But we don't need to go to the inquest in Melfort to find trouble in our world. I and we don't know how the next six months will go with our new, and yet old, leadership structure. It almost feels like we are heading off into the dark looking for the way. Health concerns (body, mind or spirit) can be all consuming, possessing every thought. Relationship woes in the work or home space are like a low-grade fever which threatens to burn hot at any moment. Various forms of addictions, work included, can be demons which lead us to neglect the most important aspects of life. We live with and embody the troubles of the text.

Yes, there is trouble in our world. Sunset has overtaken us and our world. There are diseases and demons out there, and in us. It often feels overwhelming.

There is Hope in Our Text: Our Biblical texts do not leave us alone. They acknowledge the reality and then offer a guiding light. Yes, we as humanity seem to be burning down the house, and that is not the end of the story. Take Peter's mother-in-law, for example. The text and I mentioned her earlier.

Peter's mother is renewed. Quoting now from people more learned than I: "the manner in which Mark describes the healed woman's activities after she is restored is striking. We are told literally that "she ministered to them." The verb used here is one which Mark employs in a restricted and seemingly deliberate way. Jesus declares that he came "to minister" (10:45); we read that angels "ministered" to Jesus (1:13); and Mark tells us that, here, Simon's mother-in-law "ministered to them," and later, that the Galilean women who followed Jesus and saw his crucifixion "ministered to him" (15:41). The angels and Jesus are clearly under God's authority...But what about the women?... Because of their social position in Jewish culture, women were generally vulnerable, not powerful; yet Mark may be telling us that those who are truly vulnerable are capable of true service, or ministry".³ This ministry of Peter's mother-in-law is the basis of our word "deacon" (διακονέω). A woman of considerable age becomes the first deacon. Given her age and gender, such a deaconship should not be lost on the reader. Nor would it have been lost on the hearers of the 1st and 2nd centuries. Age and gender are no boundaries for those Jesus invites to serve.

³ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe—ibid.

It is also important to note that in Isaiah God does not leave the exiled Hebrews alone. They look down, hanging their heads in a dejected manner. God says look up. Lift your heads. Open your eyes amidst the darkness. What do you see? You see stars. What does this remind you of, oh my loved ones. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light (ch 9:1 in Is of the Hebrew text). You worry about your heritage, Abraham and Sarah, look up. The number of stars you see in the sky will pale in comparison to your descendants (Gen 15:5). They look up and remembered the promises of old. These are but two examples of Good News within our texts amidst the bad news. There are parallels to now.

There is Hope in Our World: I do not want to be pollyannish in speaking of the hope that is present in God and the way of Jesus. I do not diminish the rough circumstances with which we, others, and our environment exist. My earlier illustrations tried to highlight the serious condition of things. And yet, there are points of Divine progress out there.

Take, for example, the decision of the International Court of Justice to proceed with South Africa's question about genocide in Gaza. True, there was no cease fire required, but that was not the basis of case. If, indeed, Israel can document (as they have been asked to do) that activities associated with genocide are not taking place—things like bombing hospitals / infrastructure, relocating population, denying humanitarian aid and so forth—a type of cease fire will be in place. Granted, Israel can ignore the ICJ ruling even as Russia has done. Still, though, it is good to know that the vast majority of the world can recognize and name disproportionate violence, genocide, when it happens. To be able to name such transgression is a good start.⁴

Many of us lament the regressive renewable energy policies world wide, and particularly in this Province. Did we know, though, that renewable energy production has nearly reached the world's total power generation present in 2000?⁵ This is good news, hope, amidst a tide of environmental woes.

We hear and sense the political tensions in our country and world. How does the Holy Land find a way forward once the stabbings and the bombing ends? How do Ukraine and Russia learn to co-exist? How does North America find a way for political teamwork on important issues like poverty, housing, and the environment? It seems hopeless. The good news, the hope, is that most people do not like bipartisanship. Even what we consider to be a polarized country like the U.S., people actually want to work together on important issues and particularly at a local level.⁶ The US House of Representatives is working across party lines for

⁴ [What has the ICJ ordered Israel to do on Gaza war, and what's next? | Israel War on Gaza News | Al Jazeera](#)

⁵ *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (weeks of January 1 & 8, 2024), p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

greater support for low income people—people of faith striving to do something positive for the economically most vulnerable in the States.⁷ Sure there are demons in the system spewing forth hate, but many people are still grounded in something beyond fear and hate. As people who follow the way of Jesus, this can embolden us to sit with people, regardless of the political or cultural ilk, and work at the concerns that face us all.

I really appreciated the part of Susanne’s sermon last week in which she highlighted the on-going task God has self assigned to calling new prophets. I take tremendous hope in this at an international and congregational level. Communism, Zionism, Nationalism and Secularism all take their toll on God’s people. The historic pattern, the biblical story alluded to last week, is that God doesn’t stop. You disappear the prophet, God will raise up others. You exile the Mennonite pastor in Communist Russia, God will raise up other leaders. Pastors resign and move on, and the Spirit continues to inspire those who remain for the ministry among us and around us.

This Tuesday’s StarPhoenix covered the positive response of James Smith Cree Nation Reserve. I did not know this, but the school has hosted hand drawn art of love and healing the last year. The Reserve had a round dance after the inquest to support each other. In the midst of immense tragedy, they are striving towards great compassion and support.⁸

Naming the hope with which we live is critical. After all the healing, Jesus does two things: he prays and then he preaches. That is the third episode of today’s scripture text from Mark’s gospel, and it should not be lost upon us.

What is our discipleship of the texts this week?

We seek healing. Can we be honest with ourselves and our feelings? Loss, transgression, desperation.... we bring them to Jesus in the twilight as the darkness seems to enfold us. In that dusk, Jesus receives us.

We get healed, as best as able, and then we serve. Jesus does not care about our social status. He wants our healing and our ministry.

Finally, we go with Jesus on a proclamation tour. We name the good news that is happening. There is hope to be shared. Tragically, in our world if it doesn’t bleed it doesn’t lead. So we give voice to Good News.

The road is not always clear. Amidst the confusion, street sludge and fumes.—there is a new day dawning. So we inch forward towards our destination. We do so with trust in the one who guides all pilgrim peoples. Amen.

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⁷ [Something Progressive and Conservative Christians Agree On | Sojourners](#) (Feb 01, 2024).

⁸ Julia Peterson, “Round dance celebrates strength, perseverance of JSCN community” in *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (Tuesday, January 30, 2024), A1 & A3.