

Epiphany 5, Yr. B

Feb. 4, 2018

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark1:29-39

This is going back a bit, but I'm sure many of you remember the movie "Chariots of Fire." And, if you do, you'll remember that scene where Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner, reads this same Isaiah passage from the pulpit of a church in Paris. And, you'll also remember that, after training for the Olympics for years, he's refused to run in the qualifying 100-meter heat because the race is being run on a Sunday. In fact, while he's preaching about the young who shall run and not be weary, the race is going on without him. He's made the decision that the Sabbath is sacred and needs to stay that way. (As a bit of an aside, he'd undoubtedly be appalled at all the sporting events being held on Sundays these days.) He made that decision in spite of a lot of pressure being put on him by the British Olympic Committee and the Prince of Wales. They have told him that by refusing to run, he's rejecting his country and fellow citizens. One of the Dukes in the conversation says that one's decision should always be made on the basis of KING FIRST AND GOD AFTER – which is, when you think about it, a pretty amazing thing to say. Liddell responds, in the sense of this Isaiah reading, by saying that God made the countries and God makes the kings and the rules by which they govern; those rules include rules about the Sabbath which he intends to keep. Public opinion was deeply divided by Eric's decision not to run – some thought he was a religious fanatic; others thought he was a man of principle. He made his decision, in the light of the Isaiah reading, by recognizing that ultimately, God is in charge – not the nations, not the princes and rulers. And that God, who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless, will give strength to those who wait upon him.

A word about the context of the reading. Isaiah was writing to a community in exile. The Babylonians had defeated the Israelites and taken many of them back to Babylon. The ones taken into exile were probably not suffering economic hardship, unlike those left behind, who were living in the ruins of their country which continued to be raided by marauders. They faced daily challenges just to live. The exiles, however, faced a different kind of challenge – doubt. After their devastating defeat, questions arose: maybe their gods really ARE more powerful. It's clear that our God couldn't insure our safety and security. Maybe our God isn't powerful enough. Maybe he just doesn't care. Isaiah is responding to those questions: HAVE YOU NOT KNOWN? HAVE YOU NOT HEARD? HASN'T IT BEEN TOLD YOU FROM THE BEGINNING? Don't you remember that our God is the almighty creator, who is mighty in power, who never grows weary? We maybe don't understand his ways, in fact, we surely don't, but we can remember everything we know about our God and what he has done and TRUST him. There are no magic cures or immediate fixes, but trust, WAIT for the Lord.

Waiting, trusting. They're both really hard to do. Thinking first about trust, someone has said that we are all tempted to a kind of theological amnesia. We forget all the things God has done for us, whether personally, or throughout history. Somehow we take all that for granted and so, when things are going wrong, we're tempted to move away from that solid rock of trust that will keep us grounded and, instead, are prey to doubt: where is God when I need him? I remember teaching a Bible course on Exodus when I was in Dallas. There was a wonderful woman in the class, who was the headmistress of the school at the time. She was a no-nonsense kind of gal.

So when I said something about the Israelites doubting that God could give them water even after he'd given them manna, she piped up and said, "Well, of course. God acted on Monday, but this is Tuesday. How do we know he'll act again?" So remembering and then trusting.

And then there's that bit about waiting. Simone Weil, a French mystic and spiritual writer says that waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life. Waiting, though, is really hard. We much prefer to be DOING something, even when we're not sure what that should be. You know the phrase, DON'T JUST SIT THERE; DO SOMETHING. I'm suggesting that that phrase should be turned on its head – it should be DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING; FIRST SIT THERE. Or perhaps it should be don't just do something, first sit there and pray. You'll notice, in that regard, that in the gospel, after Jesus had cured Peter's mother-in-law and Mark says the whole city was gathered outside the door wanting Jesus to cure their sick, Jesus went to a deserted spot and prayed.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, has a retreat center in New Mexico, called the Center for Action and Contemplation. Obviously, from the name of the place, you understand that we need both prayer and action in order to lead fully Christian lives. But he wrote somewhere that he's discovered that the emphasis needs to be on the CONTEMPLATION part – the waiting and praying part. If it's not, he says, then we rush into action and that action often comes from the wrong place: from anger or fear or desire, or sometimes just the need to be DOING something.

In the Clearing class that I'm teaching, I make reference to the fact that in pre-modern societies, innovation and change were discouraged, because there was no real way to implement new ideas. In his book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman says that in this era of globalization, innovation is the name of the game. If you can't keep up, too bad for you. He says the image used in Silicon Valley is that of lions and gazelles. When the lion wakes up in the morning, he knows that he's going to have to run faster than the slowest gazelle or he'll go hungry; when the gazelle wakes up, it know that it's going to have to be faster than the fastest lion, or it'll be someone's breakfast. The only thing they have in common is that they both know that when the sun comes up they have to start running. Most of us in Door County are sheltered from this a little because we're retired, but we know his picture of the modern world is accurate. So how does prayer and waiting on God fit into today's world. It's not an easy fit.

Perhaps you've read about the experiment that some psychologists did here in an American seminary. They took a class of theological students, told them they were part of an experiment in verbal retention and that each of them would go into a room, be read a passage and then go down a long corridor to the other end of the building and be asked to repeat the passage. In fact, they were testing something completely different. To half the students, they read a variety of passages; to the other half they read the parable of the Good Samaritan. Then they stationed a man hallway along the corridor and had him lie on the ground, battered looking, like the man in the parable. They wanted to discover if more students would stop to help if they had heard the parable. They discovered several things: first of all, the number who stopped to help was not high at all and not appreciably higher among those who had heard about the Good Samaritan. And among those who HAD heard the parable, some had been told that they had to HURRY to the other end of the building – of those who got that message, not a single student

stopped. There are probably any number of things we could draw from this, but at least one message is that hurry blinds us.

But other things blind us as well. The objective of waiting for the Lord, of prayer and silence, is to make sure that, with what we're doing, it is indeed God that's in charge. Think again about that Mark reading. Jesus has been a big success in Capernaum. His preaching was well received in the synagogue; now he's healed Peter's mother-in-law and following that, he healed many, the text says, who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons. But then, in the morning, while it was still dark, Mark tells us that Jesus went to a deserted place to pray. Simon and his companions come to find him and tell him that everyone is searching for him. You can well imagine that they are! Simon was probably clear about what Jesus should be doing – Simon had probably been approached by the Capernaum Chamber of Commerce with an offer that was too good to refuse. Because Jesus had done some amazing things and, if he stayed there, he'd put Capernaum on the map. So they wanted him – they could offer him all the good things we all want – security, safety, prosperity, respect. But you'll remember that Satan had offered Jesus all those same things when he tempted him in the desert – turn these stones into bread – surely a great avenue for gaining lots of the good things of life. Or, prove that you're the Son of God by doing something really spectacular, like throwing yourself off the Temple and letting God's angels catch you. Or how about I give you all the kingdoms of the world if you just worship me? Do you hear it? All the good stuff of the world: power, security, prosperity, respect. And Jesus turned it all down. No, he says, we need to go into the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there – for that's what I've come to do. That waiting and that prayer allowed him to see the larger picture, to overcome all those very human temptations, whether of doubt or desire.

Let me close by going back to "Chariots of Fire." As you know, Eric ended up running in a different race, when one of his teammates stepped aside so that he could take his place. It was the 400 meter race, much farther than that for which he had trained. But he ran it and won. He said it felt as if a spirit had entered his body, urging him on, giving him the strength and endurance to push himself to the limit of his power.

His father had earlier told him that you can praise God by peeling a potato if you peel it to perfection – so Erick should run in God's name and let the world stand back in wonder. And that's what happened; the world saw a young man who had waited on the Lord and who then mounted up as with the wings of an eagle.

Amen.