Sermon – Strength Training

St. Alban’s, DC – 2/4/18 – The Rev’d Emily Griffin

Isaiah 40:21-31, I Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

It’s enough to make anyone tired. In today’s Gospel we’re given just the second half of Jesus’ first full day of public ministry. He’s spent the morning teaching, confronting evil, trying on this new, more vocal role for size. You’d think that would be enough time on the front lines for opening day. But no – he can’t even go to a friend’s house for dinner without a sea of need washing up ashore. He tends to Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. And then just as the sabbath ends, as if on cue, practically the whole city is at the door - wave upon wave of sickness and brokenness, with the promise of more of the same in the morning. And it’s not just the individual suffering he sees; that’s bad enough. He knows that there’s an entire system of neglect and greed pushing these people to the edges. He knows that for every life he heals and restores, every person he pulls out of the river, there are even more being thrown in.

So what does he do? He gets up before anyone has a chance to ask for anything and finds a quiet place to pray. It doesn’t last long. Even his disciples don’t know how to give him space. The text says they “hunted” for him. I’m not sure anyone enjoys being hunted. Pursued, chased maybe – but hunted – we know how that ends. He could have stopped then and there, I suppose – gone back to sleep, let someone else face the flood of need. But no - he takes a deep breath, reminds himself of why he’s here, puts one foot in front of another, and gets back to work.

If Jesus sounds a little weary even at this early stage of the game, Mark (our Gospel writer) wouldn’t mind you drawing that conclusion. Mark’s Jesus isn’t a pasty, plaster saint with boundless pluck and verve. He gets tired. He gets angry; he’s decidedly not serene. It’s part of his charm, I think. Despite his extraordinary powers to heal, his humanity is also on full display. Mark has no interest in hiding it. He wants us to think about the choices Jesus didn’t make. Jesus could have done what we tend to do when faced with an onslaught of need and a corrupt system perpetuating it. We fight the good fight sometimes. But we also get paralyzed; we escape and grow numb. Or we turn the actual people in front of us – and certainly those beyond us - into abstractions. We theorize about their need. We find someone to blame and pretend that’s the same thing as doing something.

Mark wants us to know that following Jesus means being awake and responsive to the pain around us, especially when it’s easier to despair than hope. So how do we do it? How do we prepare ourselves for the long haul of unjust suffering and devastating setbacks and at times flat-out evil – when the forces of nationalism and bigotry and environmental destruction are throwing people into the river faster than we can fish them out?

We need more than outrage to sustain us. That fire might burn hot, but it doesn’t last long. And pity is toothless. Even the need to be needed – a mighty force in many of us - only goes so far. Victory over evil takes more than just correctly critiquing the enemy or even feeling another’s pain; we need a picture of what we’re working toward, a vision that’s more compelling, more spacious, more beautiful frankly than the narrow, zero-sum nightmare we’ve been told to accept – where in order for us to win, someone else needs to lose.

For Jesus anyway, that vision was the kingdom of God. But he didn’t get that vision all on his own. He mined it, in part, from the traditions that came before him - from the Old Testament prophets who prepared the way. The gift of the prophets, like Isaiah from our first reading, isn’t just their ability to name what’s wrong; any Monday morning quarterback can do that. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, prophets don’t just criticize. They help us grieve the losses that can’t be reconciled, and then - they energize us by giving us an alternate vision, a new vantage point, a perspective on the present that orients us and points us to the future.

Isaiah begins his look forward by looking back – way back to the very beginning. If we can look past the puppet masters on our immediate horizon, he says, beyond the headline grabbers trying so hard to monopolize our view, we might just see what he saw – that the powers of this earth aren’t as big as we think they are. Ultimately, they’re lightweights, he says - grasshoppers compared to the Creator of the ends of the earth. They’ve been outclassed, outmatched and outplayed – even if they don’t realize it yet. As for those who think that the presence of tyrants and bullies means that God doesn’t see or care – Isaiah subtly points out the arrogance of that assumption. How can we claim to know what the Source of life does or doesn’t see? How dare we put the God of eternity on our timeclock or measure divine compassion by the limits of our own? The One who brought light out of darkness, who created order out of chaos, who spoke all that is into being isn’t bound by our tired expectations of what’s possible. Our prospects for change are not defined by our weariness or fatigue. When we’re able to keep the Creator of the universe in mind, Isaiah says, we don’t have to accept this small worldview where all others are threats and we only become strong at someone else’s expense. We don’t have to measure our strength by another’s weakness, because we’re not expected to carry everything on our own. We have a deeper well to draw from, a force of love and grace (and yes, strength) beyond our imagining that’s capable of pushing us all forward and setting us free.

In the meantime, it’s OK to be tired; the work we’re called to, the daily work of healing and justice and peace, of refusing to see anyone as an object of scorn or pity, is enough to make anyone tired. And it’s OK to step back at times and rest, to turn off the news, to step away from the phone; even Jesus needed the occasional time out to pray and regroup. Our tiredness is not a measure what we’re capable of. God “gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.” We’re told here that “those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength…they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” If we’re willing to accept it, we’re given the strength we need to keep walking when we feel like stopping, to keep putting one foot in front of another when we’d rather go back to sleep, to keep moving forward even when it feels like the world around us is going in reverse. I don’t know about you, but that’s a vision I can live with, a vision I can walk toward.

In the silence that follows, I invite you to pray however you need to. But if some questions to ponder might help: Who is looming too large in your vision today? Who might you need to push to the sidelines so you can see the far horizon more clearly? And who’s been on the edges of your sight for too long? Whose needs might need to come into greater focus for you to do the work God’s given you to do? In the Name of the One who gives us the strength to rest and to pray, as well as to walk and to run – Amen.