

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty
Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine
February 4, 2018—5th Sunday after Epiphany

First Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31 (vv. 30-31 below)

*Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹but 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.*

Gospel: Mark 1:29-39 (vv. 29-31 below)

As soon as Jesus and the disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Children's Time



I shared with the kids (and congregation) a piece of art that hangs on the wall of my church office. We talked about the two fish and—what are those with the fish? potatoes? eggs? no—five loaves of bread in the center; baskets around them, and people, with Jesus at the top. We remembered the time when Jesus was teaching more than 5,000 people outside of town, and people were getting hungry with nowhere to get food. They only had a little food with them, but with that little bit Jesus fed the whole crowd.

Then we read the inscription on the back of the framed art: "With love on your ordination, February 10, 2002, Dad & Mom." We talked about how an ordination is a special worship service in which someone is blessed and commissioned to be a pastor, and how that happened to me 16 years ago this week. I said that when I was ordained, I chose this story to be read because I always wanted to remember it as a pastor—because sometimes in church and in life you feel like there isn't enough of anything to go around. I always wanted to remember that Jesus takes what we have and turns it into what we need.

Vocation as a Means of Grace

In the depths of winter, everything in life can feel like you're just slogging through it. (Am I the only one who feels that way in February?!) Maybe you're working your way through your fifth cold of the season. Maybe you're just trying to make headway on your to-do list, despite the snow and ice messing up your plans. Maybe you're desperately trying to avoid the flu. Spring may be coming eventually, but we can't see it from here yet; there's still a whole lot of winter to go, and then mostly mud to look forward to.

This is a good time of year to ask, how do you make it through? How do you make it through winter, yes, but a deeper question too: How do you make it through anything that requires slogging through sometimes? How do you make it through those times when you are waiting on the Lord and do NOT feel lifted up like an eagle, but more "grounded like a hamster"? No matter how much you love a particular job, there are times when it feels like slogging through. No matter how much you love your family and friends, there are times in your role as parent or caregiver or friend to someone going through a tough time, when you're barely hanging in there.

Years ago I served as a campus minister on a project helping university students find their callings and make choices about their vocations—that is, the roles they would take on in their work and family lives. One component of the project was work with faculty and staff. For these older adults, we found that the overarching question was different from the students'. The question was not so much what vocation do you choose, but rather, how do you sustain the vocations you have? What keeps you engaged, strong, and confident? In the inevitable times when it is really a slog, how do you make it through?

With the anniversary of my ordination coming in the depths of February, this is the question I hoped today's readings might address: How do you sustain a vocation over time?

I was kind of hoping that a feeding story might come up in the lectionary for today; wouldn't that have been perfect?! Alas. Isaiah is good encouragement, with the promise of eagles' wings. But before that, there's a whole lot of waiting on the Lord. And then Mark gives us this healing story, which is kind of strange at first. What kind of person gets up from their sickbed and cooks dinner for the whole house? More to the point, what kind of people *expect* her to?

Commentators trying to address that question point out a couple things. First, that the word for “serve” is in Greek, *diakonia*, which we also translate “minister” and from which we get the word “deacon.” Secondly, that in her culture, being able to serve was an honored position in the household. One Lutheran commentator even points out the connection with service and vocation, saying that this is not as much a healing story as it’s a story of calling.¹

Simon’s mother-in-law does not serve because she has to, because she is compelled to, because someone asks her to, because that’s her supposed place. She serves because this is what discipleship looks like. She serves, showing us what following Jesus will really mean....

(T)he story of Simon’s mother-in-law is her call to discipleship story.... Jesus doesn’t heal just to heal, just to prove himself, or just to confirm God’s activity in the world. Jesus heals for the sake of, because of, and assuming that the Kingdom of God is here -- and that we are a part of it, that we have a role in it, and Jesus needs us.

And as it turns out, and what Simon’s mother-in-law reveals, is that this role looks an awful lot like how Jesus himself will describe his own ministry, his own power, and his own presence, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

So there’s much more to this gospel reading than the expectation that Simon’s mother-in-law serve everyone because she’s a woman. But referring to this as a call story can give the wrong impression about vocation. Since we say that our vocations are the particular ways we are called to serve, this story makes it sound like Jesus heals us, and THEN we can respond with service. It’s a classic Lutheran pattern—God’s grace, then our response of gratitude.

If that were the case, then this story wouldn’t help much in times when you’re slogging through. Jesus heals you; you serve. Boom. If service gets hard, did the healing not work? But that’s only how the story goes IF you think of vocation as something you have, or service as something you do. But it’s a different story if vocation is more like a place you inhabit—somewhere you are, not something you do. That’s what I’ve come to believe in these years of observing people living their vocations, both when they are easy and when they are very hard: that vocation is more like a place you inhabit—somewhere you are, not something you do.

Thanks to all the people who have shared their vocations with me over the years—service in their jobs, service in their families, service in congregations—I read this story of healing a particular way. I see vocation not as the post-healing service, but rather as the sickroom itself. Our vocations are like places—places in which we spend a good portion of the time lying in bed with fevers of worry, mistakes, arrogance, anxiety, uncertainty, and sometimes downright incompetence. They are the places we wait for the Lord. And, praise be to God,

¹ You can read the whole blog post by Karoline Lewis, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5052>

they are the places where Jesus comes again and again to lift us up—the vocation itself being a means of healing grace.

We all bring different wounds to our vocations, wounds of which we may or may not be completely conscious but which we long to have healed. For some of us, it may be a deep sense of unworthiness, or shame, or never being quite enough. For me, it was always a sense that I didn't belong anywhere. Wherever I was, I could find reasons that I would never fit. I was not miraculously healed and THEN enabled to minister. Instead, looking back I can see how in congregations over the years, my sense of not-belonging often got in the way of doing ministry. But I can also see how my role as pastor became a means of grace, bringing me to new and deeper senses of belonging in the world and to specific communities. Using the image of Mark's gospel, ministry has been my sickroom, and Jesus has shown up there over and over to lift me up. ("Lift up," by the way, is the same word in Greek as the word for resurrection. What would it be like to see the story of our vocations, like the story of Simon's mother-in-law, as stories of resurrection?)

None of us are finished products. The healing continues, and it may take us by surprise sometimes, both the depths of the wounds and the immense possibilities of grace. These days, as the parent of a 2-year-old and an almost-5-year-old, I am keenly aware of the way kids seem to know exactly where their parents' wounds are. We refer to it as kids "knowing what buttons to push," but I think "pinpointing the wounds" might be even more accurate. And yet how often do children (or parents, or spouses, or friends) become a means of grace, even when they are at their most challenging? What would it be like to see the story of parenting and other relationships as stories of healing and even resurrection—not as something we do AFTER we have been healed, but as the sickroom in which we wait on the Lord for healing grace?

This is the testimony I most wanted to share on this 16th anniversary of my ordination—the witness to vocation as a means of grace and healing. As you may know, I will be moving on to something other than congregational ministry in a few months, a new twist on my vocation, as yet to be determined. So I say all this, aware that this may be the last time I will reflect on this anniversary from the pulpit. But I offer this witness today for all kinds of vocations, not just ordained ministry. And I offer it in this transition time for all of us, because transitions can be kind of a slog sometimes too. If vocation is more like a sickroom where we experience uncertainty and anxiety, then here we are, in exactly the right place to wait on the Lord. Even transition may be a time not merely to be endured and "gotten through," but rather a time to look for healing and resurrection. A time to look for epiphanies. (Perhaps the same may be true for winter, too.)

And if that's true, then this is an excellent time to praise God. In a few minutes we will sing a hymn I chose for us all to sing at my ordination, for the same reason then as today: for this one line, "Ponder anew what the Almighty can do." But before we sing, we will pray. We will pray for this congregation as you discern your calling together and seek your next pastor to lead you in it. And while we're at it, let's start praying for your next pastor, whoever he or she may be.

God of the journey, God of transition and the long haul: We pray for the congregation of Redeemer Lutheran Church. Guide us through this time of transition. Open our eyes to your healing and grace. Open our eyes to the ways that you feed us and lift us up. Empower us to serve you even when we are uncertain of our abilities or of the way ahead. We pray for the pastor you will lead to this congregation. Guide him or her through the transition; bring healing and grace, sustenance and new life. Give us patience as we await the fulfillment of your purposes for us all, and inspire us to praise you in this time.

And let the people say, Amen!

Hymn of the Day: ELW 858, Praise to the Lord, the Almighty