

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

Renewing Our Strength
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Mary R. Brownlow

Last June, William and I did a day hike up to the summit of Mount Whitney, the highest mountain in the lower 48 states. It is a beautiful, epic hike, starting in the dark at 3:30 in the morning, and then going up and up with mountains spread out around and below. And then, when you reach the summit, huffing and puffing, you feel like an eagle in the air, on top of the world. But, as we sometimes need to remind ourselves, the goal is not the summit, but the car in the parking lot at the end of the hike. As we were walking down, late in the day, a couple of miles from the trailhead, William (who was walking behind me) said, “Mary, did you know that you were listing to the left?” And I said, “Oh, that just because my walking pole on that side is a bit shorter.” (I am a real expert in denial.) And William said, “When was the last time you drank some water?” And I said, “Oh, I just ran out a little while ago.” And William said, “Stop.” And he took out a bottle of water and watched me drink some. And I gradually stopped listing and got down the mountain.

Now, maybe I would have reached the parking lot anyway. Maybe. But the fact is that we can do amazing things when we remember how to stay strong, and we can get off course when we ignore the signals. It is a matter of being aware of both limitations and possibilities. And sometimes we need companions to remind us of what will help us to reach our goals, whether it is a little rest, or a sip of water, or a Kit Kat bar.

This week, I read our passage from the 40th chapter of Isaiah. It speaks of human weariness and divine strength. It speaks to generational differences, saying that “even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” It’s not just the adults who feel tired or get thirsty. Mid-way through any task we can get weary, and we need a renewal of strength to finish the work and accomplish our goals. Sitting in a pew, sitting in a meeting, working on a meal at the Listen Center, whatever our calling in our ministry together, we need infusions of power; we need to take hold of that vision that we will soar on eagles’ wings.

The Prophet Isaiah was writing in a time of exile and uncertainty: inspirational words for people at a crossroads. I sometimes think of this section of the book of Isaiah as a kind of re-alignment or re-boot of Israel’s theology...if I can speak in technical rather than theological language. Or maybe it’s like when Comcast sends a “refresh” signal to my modem. Those rhetorical questions: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” mean that the prophet knows that people need reminding from time to time. They need to look back so they can look forward. Today you may be exhausted, but look at the big picture and see how God works in all of creation. You may be as small as a grasshopper, or as impermanent as chaff in the wind, but the omnipotent God loves and works through humankind.

Our Gospel reading today also speaks to the problem of weariness and human frailty. The setting is the Sabbath day in Capernaum, and Jesus has just had an encounter at the synagogue with a disturbed man and a bewildered but fascinated congregation. He goes to the home of one of his newly called disciples, Simon Peter. Simon’s mother-in-law is in the grip of a fever. We know

nothing about this fever – whether it is of long-standing, its cause, its intensity – but we know that in the ancient world a fever was both dangerous and isolating. A valued family member was unable to be about her business, which was offering hospitality. The matriarch of the house was out of commission. This healing is more than the end of a fever: it is a reclaiming of vocation and relationship. All healing and exorcisms in this Gospel are more than they seem: they are a visible and tangible expression of the renewing power of the Kingdom of God, mending hearts and communities.

The text says that Jesus takes her hand and lifts her up. It's an interesting turn of phrase. That "lifting up" word is used at the end of the Gospel to speak of Jesus' resurrection. And in other healing stories, Jesus is often "lifting people up." The God of the Psalms "lifts up the downtrodden," and the ministry of Jesus continues this work of renewal and restoration. When the people Jesus meets are laid low by illness, by harmful spirits, by shame or by poverty, he lifts them up, somehow gives them new strength, and allows them to take their place in the community again.

What is the first thing that Simon's mother-in-law, the household matriarch, does when she's up and about? "She began to serve them." Now, we could be negative about this, or snide, and make jokes about how women have to start working in the kitchen the moment they get up off a sickbed. But when this woman "serves" we hear the word *diakoneo*, which is the same word used for the servant-leaders of the early church: deacon. Jesus later uses this word of himself when he says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." Simon Peter's mother is not a pitiable, un-liberated woman (not that we can apply our standards to the first-century world). She is the first person in this Gospel to be about the true business of a disciple. She starts "deaconing," renewed to be as strong as an eagle in flight. She received God's healing touch, reclaimed her vocation, and started to share in the healing of others. Talk about a "refresh" signal!

This woman's home became a house of healing and refreshment, a magnet for all the local people who sought a healing touch. Once the sun went down and the Sabbath was over, it says that the whole city gathered around her door. She was no longer cut off by her own illness: she was integrated into her social world. Lifted up, she had reclaimed her identity, living a life of value and service.

Right in this first chapter of this Gospel, we learn that Jesus' ministry is about restoring those who have been cut off from community. Anyone who has been seriously ill in our own time knows the joy of returning to even the most simple aspects of community life. Or are they so simple? When we share laughing and singing and praying and eating together after worship, and strategizing about our work in the world, the simple becomes extraordinary. Our simple actions are infused with power, and the ability to tap into the same Spirit that energized Jesus.

But here, in this story, we see that Jesus's energy was not endless. After that long night of healing work, transforming outcasts into insiders, he got up early, in the dark, and went into the wilderness to pray. Was he depleted? Was he thirsty for rest? Did he have doubts about the purpose and direction of his ministry? Was he just sick of all the demands made on him? We aren't given that information. But I think that here we see the very human Jesus: not the source of power, but the *conduit* of power. His work involves a rhythm of spiritual practice: both prayer and action. I wonder if he murmured a prayer using the words of Isaiah: "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." I wonder if he began to assess his healing power and personal authority; to assess this gift and discern its best use.

His disciples seem a bit clueless about all this, as they often do – almost as clueless as I was as I walked lopsidedly down Mount Whitney. Simon and his companions go searching for him, excitedly talking about the sensation he has created by his healing marathon. But Jesus's time of waiting on the Lord has refreshed his signal. He says that proclaiming the message is the priority. He will continue to heal and restore and renew, but he widens his scope to bring the message to other towns, and even to foreigners. The message says, "The Kingdom of God has come near." He demonstrated the Kingdom of God in word and action, with an urgency and power rooted in prayer.

Today, as we anticipate our annual meeting and the coming year, the question for us might be: when does the church show the same kind of urgency, the same dependence on the source of power, the same sense of something important at stake? When do we confront those things that keep each person from a vocation of service and joy? How do we seek to offer healing to a world possessed by violence and injustice? How do we say, "The Kingdom of God has come near?"

The unique character of the church is that it admits to being a place full of people who need healing, and people who have learned to be healers. We admit to being in need of renewal. We are all Simon Peter's mother-in-law, recently risen from a place of pain, now empowered to offer care to others. We are those who can respond to those who need care today and to those who seek to discover their calling in the future. We have a communal and an individual calling to offer hospitality and healing; to offer inclusion and the nurture of gifts. We have the opportunity to be a safe and sacred space for considering troubling questions of injustice and inequity with loving and respectful discourse.

As we approach our annual meeting and begin the work of a new year, we may need a refresh signal. We may need a sip of water. We may need that moment or that season of waiting and hoping on the Lord so that we can be strengthened and renewed. Waiting and hoping are not passive verbs: they are about an active and aware anticipation. They involve an intensified posture of openness to divine grace and possibility.

Our community of faith can worship its way to renewal and new life, and in doing so, we can offer something to our weary, fainting world. Like Jesus, we can be conduits of a greater power. Like the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, our church can be a house of healing and refreshment, a magnet for all people who need a healing touch. In the coming months, we will consider what congregational renewal means – how do we even define it or recognize it? It is as simple as a sip of water or a moment of prayer or hearing a moving song? I would like to suggest that we will know we are renewed when the future looks more exciting, more full of possibility than the past. Have you not seen? Have you not heard? God gives power to the faint. God lifts us up. Thanks be to God. Amen