

5 Epiphany – Year B – February 8, 2009
Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39
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Let us pray. *O gracious and holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive Thee, intelligence to understand Thee, diligence to seek Thee, patience to wait for Thee, eyes to behold Thee, a heart to meditate upon Thee, and a life to proclaim Thee; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.* (Benedict of Nursia).

Philip Yancey shares this story about a man called Anthony. At forty-nine years old, Anthony is, by his own admission, stumbling through midlife. He has been dealing with divorce and trying to find closure around his father's death, among other challenges. Anthony says that because of what he has learned about himself through these experiences, he now realizes the importance of leading a more spiritual life. Trying to live up to some traditions of masculinity like not asking for help, no crying, staying logical, and being in control led him to unhealthy and destructive behaviors. He has now begun to make time to being more open to God through prayer and reflection, long walks and spiritual readings. Anthony now asks himself a series of questions each day to keep focused on the spiritual instead of relying on the material parts of his life. The questions he asks include, how can I slow down? How can I simplify things? How can I speak up by telling the truth? How can I shed my armor and masks? How can I serve my community? Anthony says that these questions and others like them help him to touch his soul, listen, and get closer to God. Anthony is one of Jesus' disciples.

In the scenes from today's Gospel reading, we have four other named disciples. Following directly from last week's reading, Jesus leaves the synagogue and heads to the home of Simon and Andrew, along with James and John. We learn that Simon is married, because it is his mother-in-law who is sick with a fever. Now this is where this passage gets really interesting. There are a series of specific events and actions that immediately follow. The first is the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. The second is that she gets right out of her sick bed and begins to serve them. Then as the Sabbath ends at sunset, Jesus heals many of the crowds of sick people gathered around the door, silencing the demons who know His name. Early in the morning, Jesus slips out and goes to a deserted place to pray. When the others wake up and find him missing, they hunt him down to tell him everyone is searching for him. Instead of heading back into town to heal more sick people, Jesus declares that they will go to the neighboring towns to proclaim the message, "for that is what I came out to do." True to His word, we are then told that Jesus continues His preaching mission in the synagogues, sharing the Good News throughout Galilee and casting out demons.

Each of these events is intimately intertwined. And weaving through it all as the common thread is Jesus' presence and Jesus' spiritual practices. From His earliest life, Jesus is found either in the Temple or in the synagogue, worshipping God, and sharing His teaching about God, that is as One who saves, heals, and redeems. In all His words and deeds, Jesus teaches about God who gives life where there is none. We are not told specifically whether Simon's mother-in-law is one of Jesus' disciples, but living in Simon's home, she must have heard a lot about Jesus. What we are told, is that Jesus' presence and touch physically and metaphorically took possession of her, and powerfully filled her with new life, causing her to rise up. It is the same word used later in Mark and the others Gospels to describe Jesus' resurrection. That alone gives a strong indication of how close this woman was to death. It also shows us how her life of service reflects the promise of the resurrection. Jesus has the power to heal our erratic human temperaments from our fevered misplaced actions to our stubborn inaction transforming all into calm and joyful service with thanksgiving. Jesus' grounding in Scripture, in worship, in the community of God's children enables Him to be a powerful witness for God, and a powerful emissary of God's healing. You and I also gather in this place to learn about the Scriptures, to worship the Lord our God, enjoy the fellowship of this wonderful community of faith,

and live a resurrection life now. As we each welcome Jesus to fill our hearts, to tenderly take hold and dwell with us, you and I are also transformed into living, walking witnesses of God and become ambassadors of God's healing.

After a long day of teaching and a long evening of healing, Jesus goes out alone to a deserted place to pray. Jesus is God incarnate, so why would He need to pray? Jesus is also fully human, and He *needs* to pray. In His divinity, Jesus does all that God does: He lives and gives life, He teaches, He heals, He gathers in community, He listens, He builds relationships – He prays. Does that mean that the Holy Trinity, the Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit pray together? Absolutely. The essence of God is relationship, three in One. Prayer is relationship. Someone once said that, “To be conscious of God *is* to pray. Prayer is not so much our words to God as our life in God.” God is conscious, God is life, and so God is also prayer. By the way, a synonym for prayer is hope. In His divinity, prayer is a natural part of Who Jesus is. In His humanity, Jesus is showing us that prayer is an essential part of our lives in Christ, and in God. Do you and I always have to go into the desert to pray? Not always, but the desert has a way of clarifying, simplifying, and helping us to focus. It takes away some of the pollution that fills our lives. It's like the difference between trying to look at the stars from the center of Phoenix and seeing the stars here on the Mountain. Jesus, the desert and prayer are good friends. After His baptism, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the desert. In His work of prayer there, Jesus finds the strength to resist Satan's temptations, and He also discerns God's will for His ministry. While the place can be important to help us focus, it is prayer that is the essential ingredient of your life, and my life in Christ. Prayer is relationship, and for you and me, it is also an act of trust and faith. Moreover, it is a tangible way to remind ourselves of our dependence on God. In prayer, we are talking to God, listening to God, relying on God's strength to resist evil, and asking Jesus to cast out our demons, however they are manifested in our lives. In prayer, our lives are enfolded into the life of God.

After praying, we see a renewed clarity of mission in Jesus with a focus on spreading the Word, and healing. In other words, we see Jesus' own response to God. After some life changing events, Anthony began to get intentional about his spiritual life and started to pray as a way to enter into a closer relationship and be more open to God. Simon's mother-in-law, like many of the women we will encounter in Mark's Gospel account, is an amazing example of discipleship in her response to Jesus. Like Anthony, and Simon's mother-in-law, in every circumstance and event of our lives, we are constantly invited to respond to God in a multitude of ways. Perhaps it is a response of compassion to the face of Christ we see in a stranger in need. Maybe it's a response of thanksgiving for God's gifts and goodness, for God's mercies. Or even a response to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that compel us to serve our Lord in the ministries that He has prepared for each of us. In any event, prayer is like the key that unlocks the door in the wall, where the wall around us is what we know as self. Prayer is like the giant swinging ball of the demolition crew that breaks down the wall between self and God. Prayer is the insight that enables us to understand that Jesus is the door to abundant life. Prayer is the silence that follows and the space we create for the Holy Spirit to dwell expansively within our hearts. In the words of Heinrich Arnold, “Christian discipleship is not a question of our own doing; it is a matter of making room for God so that He can live in us.”

With thanks to Patricia B. Clark, let us now pray. *“Hidden God, ever present to [us], may [we] now be present to you, attentive to your every word, attuned to your inspirations, alert to your touch. Empty [us] that [we] may be filled with you alone.”*

Amen.