



Experiencing God's Presence

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 7, 2021
Mark 1:29-39; Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147*

I heard recently about a young man in his twenties who was dying of muscular dystrophy. He was an extraordinary person, very smart and funny. He was understandably very angry with God. When his uncle went to the hospital to visit, he asked if the young man would like the Bible to be read to him. The young man answered, "Sure, I like good fiction."

That response, as poignant and funny and sharp as it is, is one I think we can all understand. The Bible is full of strange stories, some of them wonderful, some of them incomprehensible. The Bible speaks of many things, including a vision of a world in which God wipes away every tear from our eyes, a world in which the lion lies down with the lamb, and swords are beaten into ploughshares, and everyone sits down under their own vine, and no one makes them afraid, as Amanda Gorman quoted in her Inauguration Day poem.

In today's reading from Isaiah, God says:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31

This vision is tremendously beautiful. It can be so encouraging for those of us who are so weary. We are weary of this pandemic and of its terrible isolation and the choices we must make between the health of the whole community and our intense personal need for companionship and touch—or the constant risk we are

forced to expose ourselves to because we have no choice. Our country is also so weary of ongoing systemic racism and the unending burden this places on people of color. Perhaps you personally are weary of things in your own life that are hard to bear. And so when God speaks about renewed strength, running without growing weary, this can provide great hope.

But, for the young man I mentioned earlier, this particular passage was especially difficult. He detested it because he would never run or walk again. To him, this passage seemed to speak a promise that would never be kept. The Bible is full of such promises, full of such hope. There is Jesus, who never stops healing, who never stops providing good news, and who after unspeakable suffering and crucifixion rises from the dead. Which of us, experiencing sickness, would not be overjoyed to experience the healing of Jesus? Which of us, having lost our loved ones, would not give everything we have to receive them back through resurrection? What are we to make of these promises, when we are still in the midst of our weariness, when we have run out of our own resources and yet we must continue to bear things that sometimes are unbearable?

We speak in our tradition about “believing” a lot. We hear it in the creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” We hear it in some of the most well-known verses of scripture, such as the famous one from John’s gospel: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”¹ It can be very comforting to believe these promises. It can provide great strength to believe them. And, sometimes we need more than that.

Jesus himself seems to operate from a place that goes beyond belief. In last week’s gospel reading from Mark, we heard that Jesus taught “as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.” Whatever authority this was didn’t mean leadership in the religious hierarchy of his time. I think Jesus’ authority came not just from his knowledge about the scriptures but his deep personal experience of the love of God. When Jesus is baptized, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit

¹ John 3:16.

descending on him like a dove, and he hears a voice saying You are my Son, the Beloved. I am very pleased with you. And from that place, the place where head knowledge about God meets an unshakeable inner experience of God, he teaches in a way that startles and amazes people because it's so different.

Sometimes, when we hear these incredible promises of scripture, we need more than intellectual belief in them. Somehow, we need to experience their truth. In the reading from the prophet Isaiah, it says, "those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." It doesn't say, "those who wait upon God's teaching shall renew their strength," or "those who believe the right things." What it says is that those who *wait upon God* will be strengthened.

What if the prophet is saying that when we experience the mere presence of God with us in the midst of our suffering, it strengthens us immeasurably?

In our noonday prayer this week, discussing this passage and the sometimes challenging difference between the promises of scripture and their apparent fulfilment, a St. John's member said this: "The promise that we know is never broken is that *God is always with us.*" The very meaning of the English word "comfort" comes from two parts: the first part of the word, "com" meaning "with," and "fort" meaning "strong." In other words, God's companionship itself can strengthen us.

I don't know why God does not instantly take away our suffering or heal our sicknesses in the way that we would wish. It's hard truly to understand why God did not respond to Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemane by saying, yes, let this cup pass from you. I do know that we have a God who is both utterly transcendent—the one who says in the reading from Isaiah, "To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal?" and a God who is also intimately present with each of us, who calls each of us by name. And, this is a God who wants to be known.

In an interview with Carl Jung, someone asked him if he had gone to church when he was young. He said, yes of course. The interviewer asked, did you believe in God when you were young? Absolutely, he said. Then the interviewer asked, Do you believe in God now? Jung paused. Then he said, I don't have to believe in God. I know.

We are meant to experience and to *know* the presence of God to us personally, in as intimate a way as this scripture describes. Jesus knew the love of God from a deep well of tested and refined experience. It changed the way he saw the promises of scriptures, and he taught from that place. And it woke people up. Jesus preached about the kingdom or realm of God and sought always to bring heaven to earth. The kingdom of God is about the place where heart and mind and body meet right here in our actual lives. It's as much about healing Simon's mother-in-law from a fever, as it is about teaching the scriptures. We are meant not just to believe in a God in heaven who makes promises but to know the experience of God with us in a way that strengthens us beyond anything we could have anticipated.

God can encounter each of us in each moment of our lives with the endless patience born of unconditional love, just as the prophet Isaiah describes God knowing each star of the universe and calling each of them by name. God can encounter this community and this country and everyone in it, like Jesus met people at the front door of Simon's house and healed them all.

Where are you weary? When was the last time you truly felt the presence of God? Jesus speaks about belief not as an end in itself, but as a door that can open us to the experience of the Spirit within us, gushing up to eternal life. Within us, at our deepest center, is truly the presence of God, a doorway to the infinite, which contains an inexhaustible reservoir of God's love and utter mercy. Because we can rest in this no matter the circumstances, we can be strengthened. Because we can truly experience God's presence with us in every moment of our lives, we can persevere in following Jesus even if the journey is difficult.

Whatever you are doing today, I invite you to consider making time to “wait upon God.” To become grounded in a posture of receptive openness, all your senses tuned toward trust that you can encounter God’s presence. What might God say to you? What might you say to God?

I pray that your encounter with God would refresh you, grant you rest and strength, perseverance and courage to follow Jesus’ Way of Love. May you know beyond any doubt that you can trust and experience God’s promise to be with you forever. Amen.