

## **“Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired...”**

Sermon: Year B, Epiphany 5

Texts: Isaiah 40:21–31, Mark 1:29–39

Preached: February 4, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who raises us up to fly. AMEN

Have you ever gone through a period of being endlessly drained of energy? My mother, JoAnn, went through a long, awful experience with that. She had surgery to repair a serious problem that had arisen from a previous surgery she had had a number of years ago involving that surgical mesh that is the subject of class action lawsuits you hear so many TV commercial attorneys trying to enlist people for. “If you or a loved one have experienced complications...call...” That one. At any rate, after putting off the surgery for a long time, the doctors finally convinced her that there were no other options. Well, my mom is in her 80s, and the reality is that healing doesn’t come as quickly as it might have earlier in her life. Her incision simply wouldn’t heal. So for five long, long months, she spent most of her time in bed, with an 11-inch incision in her abdomen and a wound vac attached to it. After several weeks, she could get up and move to the living room where she could see the TV, but was only allowed to be up for about 30 minutes a day. She was in the front bedroom of their house, where all she had to occupy her were her books, since there’s no TV in there. Her strength was down to zero. The most routine of daily routines were inaccessible to her. She couldn’t get into the bathtub, couldn’t shower...couldn’t go teach her Sunday School class, couldn’t get out to Applebee’s, and worst of all for a Southern lady, she couldn’t get to her weekly hairdresser’s appointment.

The waiting was long and frustrating. I think it seemed to her that she would never be back on her feet again. She was in pain, was physically exhausted, was bored, was discouraged, was questioning whether she should have ever had the surgery, wondering whether this might be the end of her. On the phone, her voice sounded weaker than I had ever heard it. Time after time she made the painful and wearying trek to the wound doctor’s office, only to be given the discouraging news that the healing hadn’t progressed enough to allow them to close up the incision. But finally came the good news that they could remove the wound vac, and that she could begin to return to some of her normal routines. I knew when I called and she told me she had just gotten back from the beauty salon that things were getting better. Praise God! You could hear renewed strength in her voice, renewed hope. And most important, her focus began to turn outward again, away from that sickroom.

We all go through those weary periods at some point...those times of exhaustion, weariness, frustration. I’m always put in mind of an elderly African-American woman I visited in her hospital room who said, “Chaplain, I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.” That’s actually a quote from a Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the great voices of the Civil Rights movement, who knew something about the weary frustration of waiting for deliverance, in her case from the bone-grinding, discouraging reality of racial injustice. Sometimes the waiting just seems so long. And in our waiting, in our pain, in our weariness, we begin to turn inward. It’s easy at that point to begin to focus only on ourselves, easy for everything that is wrong to begin to loom larger and larger. We begin to think that deliverance will never come, that healing will never arrive, that the future doesn’t hold much. And sometimes, we begin to doubt God’s power to change and transform our situation.

That’s the situation facing the people of Judah in the passage we heard from Isaiah today. When these words were written to them, they had endured 50 long years of exile in Babylon. Their homeland had been laid waste, Jerusalem and the Temple lay in unrebuilt ruins. Their king had been deposed and carried off into captivity in Babylon along with the best and the brightest and the strongest of the population. The weakest and lowliest had been left to fend for themselves in a vassal state, paying crushing taxes to the mighty empire. Their economy was ruined. The people who had known how to get things done were all gone. And those who had been taken off into captivity were in limbo, as well. Their wealth was gone. They were in a strange land, forced to speak a strange tongue. Their children were forgetting the old ways, and only the oldest among them even remembered what it had been like back home, before captivity. With the Temple destroyed, their worship center where the rituals and sacrifices had taken place, they had no clue how they were even to worship God. “How are we to sing the songs of Zion in a strange land?” they lamented. They began to give up on God.

Then, in the middle of their weary despair, a new prophet Isaiah steps forward with a word from God. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” “Hey, listen up!” he says, in other words, “Snap out of it!” And he captures their feelings perfectly when he talks about God as this mighty cosmic ruler, and people as

grasshoppers scurrying about under God's feet. That's how insignificant they were feeling...like grasshoppers...little bugs. Why should God pay any attention to them? That's not very comforting, Isaiah!

But then he tells them, "Hey, look up! Do you see all these stars? The God who created them, in their trillions, knows each one of them by name. Not one of them gets forgotten! So why do you say, 'Oh, God doesn't care anything about me, God doesn't pay attention to me'?" "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Even though *you* may grow faint and weary, God doesn't. Just hang in there, because this same God who calls each star by name does *not* see you as an insignificant grasshopper...this God is going to give you power again, God's own power. Sure, you'll get tired, sure you'll get exhausted. Even the strongest young person does that. But if you'll just wait for the Lord, if you'll just lift up your eyes and keep watching expectantly, God is going to give you powerful wings like eagles, and you're going to soar again...and you know what, even if you can't soar, you're going to run again...forget that, even if you can't run again, you're going to get back on your feet and walk, and if you can't walk, God will carry you. Whatever you're able to do, God is going to be right there with you, giving you power, renewing your energy, restoring your hope."

Today's gospel story also speaks to being sick and tired. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is lying in bed with a fever. The Greek literally says she is "burning up." That's how my mother always described a fever: "You are burning up." We all know how debilitating that feeling is, don't we? All your energy is consumed by your body's struggle to conquer whatever is going on inside. You feel weak as a kitten. All your thinking is focused just on being sick. The thought of getting up and cooking or welcoming guests is the furthest possible thing from your mind. But then, in walks Jesus. He and Simon and the other guys have been directly across the street in the synagogue. Jesus has been teaching, and casting out demons, and healing people. And he walks into Simon's house, or his mother-in-law's house, whichever it was, and immediately Jesus stretches out his hand to this exhausted, sick woman, and he lifts her up, and he heals her. And in her healing, she immediately finds renewed strength, and she immediately, urgently, sets about doing the things that give her purpose, the things that give her joy. She has renewed energy for serving her friends and loved ones, and for welcoming into her home this motley throng of people who show up suddenly on her doorstep—sick people, mentally ill people, hungry people, all clamoring to meet this Jesus who is able to heal and restore and give power.

We can hear this story on a deeply personal level. Many of us struggle with illness and worry, with discouragement and despair, with exhaustion, sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. And the Good News for you today is that Christ can lift you up again, God's own power can help you to soar like eagles, or run like an athlete, or at least to keep putting one foot in front of the other. God does notice you, and cares for you. Just keep waiting on the Lord, whose great faithfulness and loyal love for us has been demonstrated over and over.

But I think we can also hear this on a communal level as the people of God assembled as Immanuel Lutheran Church. Like most congregations, especially small congregations, sometimes we can get into weariness thinking. We're tempted to turn our sight inward, and just as when we're not feeling well physically, we can begin to focus on what things are wrong, on what we don't like, on who has died or moved away, on what things have changed. We can worry about money and budget. We can become grumpy and negative. We may feel as individuals that we've contributed all we can contribute of our limited energies, and we just don't have any more to give. The tasks seem large, and the people few. The young seem as though they don't care anything about the old ways. It's tempting to want to just lie there, isn't it? "Leave me alone, I don't feel well!" We all know that feeling, every one of us.

But have you not known? Have you not heard? The God of the Universe, who calls every star by name, is speaking to you today, is speaking to us as a congregation, calling us to lift up our eyes, to look up and out, to grasp a new vision of what God has in store for us. God doesn't want us to just lie here. If we will wait for the Lord, if we will fervently pray, if we will remember and remind one another of God's faithful love and power, if we will trust God's providing and God's future, this all-powerful God is ready to restore and renew, to give us fresh power, renewed purpose. Christ reaches out his hand to us today, offering to lift us up to health and renewal, so that we can get up and serve one another and our neighbor with renewed vigor, so that we can welcome the outcast and the stranger, the sick and the lonely and the weary and the hungry who are at our doorstep, bearing us up on eagle's wings so that all can know that same power. Renewed strength is God's promise to us. Will you pray with me for that power? [*Pray.*]