

Prelude: "This Is the Air I Breathe, [VT #139]
Your Holy Presence Living in Me" [Annie Schulz]

Gathering thoughts: [Beth Woelk]

A warm welcome to this time of worship for the 5th Sunday of Epiphany!
As we turned the calendar to a new month this week, many of us wondered what February will bring as we continue to stay at home, as we hope and work for positive change, and as we pray for an outbreak of care, wellness and love in our communities. As you read and listen from home today know that in the midst of these uncertain times we hold you prayerfully in love and hope that this time of song, liturgy, prayer, scripture and reflection will be an encouragement. Today, on this first Sunday in February, we continue our Epiphany series entitled "*Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now*". All of our music for today comes from our new Mennonite hymnbook called *Voices Together!* We are grateful for the voices of our singers today and for Annie Schulz and her thoughtful musical selections. Later on, Jan Steven will bring us a reflection on the Good News, healing, and help that we are called to share in times of suffering, within our realities and limitations, and in our shared humanity. Pastor Doug and I will lead this worship time together and we're grateful to Ted Kopp for providing sound and recording.
Let us join our hearts in this call to worship and prayer.

Call to Worship:

How good it is to sing praises to our God!
Who heals our broken hearts, binding up our wounds.
Who counts the stars and calls them each by name.

How good it is to sing praises to our God!
Who gives strength to us in our weakness, with courage to face our fears.
Whose understanding is beyond our comprehension.

How good it is to sing praises to our God!
Whose empowering Love is unfailing.
Who delights in us as we place our hope in this Steadfast Love.

Come let us worship and sing praises to our God!

Prayer:

God of unfailing love,
Softens and strengthens our hearts
as we awaken to you in this time of worship.

*What in almighty pow'r was made, God's gracious mercy keepeth.
By morning glow or evening shade, God's watchful eye ne'er sleepeth.
Within the shelter of God's might, lo! all is just, and all is right.
To God all praise and glory!*

*Our God is never far away, throughout all grief distressing,
an ever-present help and stay, our peace, and joy and blessing.
As with a mother's tender hand, God gently leads the chosen band.
To God all praise and glory!*

*Then all my glad-some way along, I sing aloud thy praises,
That all may hear the grateful song my voice unwearied raises:
Be joyful in your God, my heart! With soul and body bear your part!
To God all praise and glory!*

Prayers of the People:

[Doug Schulz]

Please join your heart with mine in this time of prayer. There will be quiet pauses where you can express your own prayers – in silence or aloud, wherever you are.

God, you have given us voices,
and with our voices we praise you
with gratitude day by day,
for all the ways you guide us and provide for us.

Today, hear our prayers as we consider
our place and time in the world
still overwhelmed by pandemic COVID-19
with its destruction and restriction of life.
We hold in the focus of our compassion and care
those who grieve the loss of loved ones,
loss of livelihood, loss of life-giving connections,
and all those who face fear and loneliness now.
Be near with your peace and your power.

[Pause]

We give thanks for the ways you do empower us
with touches of cheer where we feel your Presence –
through the radiant sparkle of sunlight
on a surface of freshly fallen snow;
in the cheerful sound of the small winter bird

who braves cold breezes to sing clear and strong;
below the surface of our memories when you take us diving
deeper into times when laughter and love held us so well
no matter what season or time of life we faced, no matter our need.
Thank you for Love in all its forms, in things we could feel or see.
[Pause]

We pray that people who hold power over others –
parents, politicians, bosses, leaders of all kinds –
would relinquish any harsh forms of control,
would envision the highest good for all,
and would act in the best interests of everyone,
guiding people and processes with sincerity and grace
and the firm resolve to make the world a better place
for anyone who will be affected by their influence.
We pray for the power-holders to do well,
even as we pray for people who suffer when power
is misused in ways that makes their lives unwell.
God, guide, provide, over-ride! Renew! Restore!
Let justice flow like a stream, and war be made no more!
[Pause]

And, Lord, we are sometimes at war within our own hearts
as we struggle to grow closer to you, to do what you would do.
Help us to believe that you are indeed the way, the life and the truth.
Lead us to listen when you ask us to follow. To trust and follow you.
Show us how to take the path you are leading on, the way of love so true.
[Pause]

And for things beyond our remembrance or power to understand,
we also pray as we say the words you taught us long ago:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And
lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.” AMEN

Hymn:

“Come and See”

[VT #282]

“Come and see, come and see, I am the way and the truth,” said he.

“Follow me, follow me, come as a child, O come and see.”

Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

Christe, Christe, Christe eleison.

Scripture:

Mark 1: 29-39

[Jan Steven]

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. ³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ He answered, “Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Reflection:

“Good News in a Time of Suffering”

[Jan Steven]

I find Mark’s Gospel to be very challenging. Not because of the theology – I’m not a particularly theological person – but because of the speed at which Mark has Jesus travel. The emphasis is on IMMEDIACY and MOVEMENT! I get stressed just reading it.

Which is actually kind of funny because I am a person who likes things done quickly and moving forward is very important to me. Hubs says he gets stressed just listening to me whirl around our small apartment. And when we go for a walk, I tend to pick up the pace a little. Ah well.

Here is an brief summary of some of the things recorded of Jesus before we even reach Mark 1:29...

- Jesus has walked from Nazareth to Jordan. According to Google maps, that would be about 50 kms.
- He’s been proclaimed and baptised by John.

- Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days, being tempted by Satan.
- John the Baptist has been arrested and imprisoned.
- Jesus has begun his ministry saying, “The time has come! The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”
- He has called the first four of his 12 disciples.
- He has walked to Capernaum – a mere 79 kms.
- Jesus has given his first teaching as an adult at the synagogue and has amazed his listeners.
- He has exorcized a demon on the Sabbath! Depending on how you describe miracles, this is his first one in Mark’s Gospel. It’s also very likely the beginning of the opposition against him.
- And word has already spread about him over the region of Galilee.

Are you feeling tired like I’m feeling tired? And the pace continues. Jesus, James and John, Simon and Andrew, and a group referred to only as “they” go to the home of Simon and Andrew where Simon’s mother in law was in bed with a fever. “They” immediately tell Jesus about her situation. Jesus takes her hand and helps her up. The fever leaves her and she begins to wait on them.

Let’s s-l-o-w down just a bit and reflect on what has just happened here. Jesus (1) heals a woman and (2) he touches her and (3) does so on the Sabbath. Three social norms broken. That would not have gone unnoticed. Two healings on a Sabbath. The tongues would be wagging; the fingers would be pointing.

But not only is she physically healed; she is restored to her social status. It is easy to think “for Pete’s sake, she’s been seriously ill. And now she is already waiting on them?!” Not the case. She would have been delighted to be back in her role as the elder woman in an extended family home.

And then things feel like they speed up again. We are told after sunset the people brought to Jesus ALL the sick and demon-possessed. In fact, the whole town gathered at the door. And we are told he healed MANY but not ALL who had various diseases. And he drove out MANY but not ALL of the demons.

Why not all? I do not know. I’m just going to assume there was not enough time. Jesus and the members of the household he was staying at needed to sleep, as did the people in the street. As well as great joy, there would have been great sorrow.

Imagine being turned away with your mother who had become paralysed, when your neighbour is rejoicing because her child has been healed. Tough stuff.

Things c-a-l-m down again, but not for long. Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus went to a solitary place to pray... I don't know how prayer works for you but here is how it works for me. I have a long list of people I pray for. I go to my bedroom most afternoons for about 20 – 30 minutes. And I give the people on my list to God and ask for His intercession. But at the same time, I get what I call "my marching orders." So much so that I often have a paper and pencil with me. Of course, I pray at other times, but this is my time of focused, intentional prayer.

Jesus, I'm assuming, shares his challenges with his Father, and gets his marching orders. When Simon and friends find Jesus – after some searching – they exclaim, "Everyone is looking for you!"

But Jesus says, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." Things speed up again. Our passage for today ends with the description. "So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons."

I confess, I find the part that Jesus did not return to Peter's house - to heal and exorcize the rest of the people who had come the day before - to be heart-breaking. There is not one person listening to this sermon who has not known someone who has died very young – so before their time. Or not known a person who has unbearable pain that the medications of the day cannot address. These people would be waiting there then. They are waiting here now.

It is hard for me, maybe for you, to accept that Jesus had to accept the limitations of time and place – and that while Jesus did heal the sick and exorcise demons, Jesus's immediate concern was to preach the Good News. Or at least it seems so. Time spent preaching and teaching and walking is not time spent healing.

And what is this Good News? It is hard to quantify or define but I love the way Pastor Beth put it her sermon "Come Follow Me." She read from the Inclusive Bible. Jesus said, "The right time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!"

It is of some comfort to me, that having said that ... as Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues, he continued to drive out demons, and – I'm assuming – heal the sick.

Likewise, we are called to evangelism – to share the Good News of Jesus our Christ – and we are called to heal. To help people bodily. And to help people be valued members of society.

If I were a nurse or physician, it would be easy to see what that looks like. Surgery and medication being top of the list. Thankfully, for folks like me, this is not the only thing that can be done in order to help others heal.

I heard a podcast once about a woman who was able to defeat a normally incurable cancer. And once she was declared “cancer-free” for a particular chunk of time, instead of feeling elated and becoming a motivational speaker, the bottom fell out of her life. She could barely crawl out of bed. Yes, she had regained her health or most of it, but had lost so much. Her job, her youthful looks, her social group in chemotherapy, her cheering team. She no longer felt like a valued member of society.

She's not alone in feeling that way. A person I know who has reached the five year mark of surviving a terrible cancer told me that cancer takes away everything from you. Or at least it can seem so when you compare your health and societal status before and after this terrible disease.

And I believe that is where we – as Believers – have one of our ministries. To truly value folks who feel they have nothing to contribute and to walk with or sit with them - and help them find their way again. Their place at the table.

What “our place is” – is different for all of us. But I think all of us want to be recognized for having particular abilities, to be able to contribute. And we don't want to be patronized. We want our contributions to be REAL.

Before Covid hit, I visited a woman who had ALS. I'll call her Sophia. (Not her real name.) When I could visit, initially I found myself telling Sophia about my world outside of the institution, and these short stories made her laugh. And she would tell me a little bit about her world, before her illness, and about some aspects of life in

long term care. But when Sophia could no longer tell me about her world, it seemed inappropriate for me to natter on about my world. It did not feel reciprocal.

I asked Sophia if she would like me to read stories to her. I was thinking “Anne of Green Gables” because it was one of my Mother’s favourites. And Sophia indicated “Yes.” And I asked which one in particular. And she spelled out, “B I B L E.” So the next week I brought my Bible. I asked her which story and she responded, “J O S E P H.”

I asked, “As in Joseph and Mary?” And she shook her head – just a little - from side to side. “Joseph as in the coat of many colours?” And she nodded her head affirmatively, as best she could. And so we began. I love good stories. And I love reading with others – usually little kids. And this became a pattern for us. We covered a number of Old Testament favourites. I myself am rather fond of the story of Jonah. Likely because of the Veggie Tales version, but...I digress.

I asked her why she loved the story of Joseph so much and – with much difficulty – she communicated to me, “Because he never lost his Faith.” And this made a lifelong impression on me. Sophia died on January 18 of this year. Her sister-in-law let me know - we became friends over the years. I was relieved that her suffering had ended. This woman, Sophia, of such great physical ability could not even lift a finger to help herself at the end.

But she kept her intellectual, social, and spiritual capacities. Sophia could handle dying with ALS **with grace**. I confess, I could not. And the truth is - all of us are going to suffer somewhat and die. Even Jesus was not spared this. But Sophia would not stand for her life to be made meaningless. She kept her Faith. Knowing that God loved her, Jesus died for her, and the Holy Spirit was keeping her company – and that at the end of her days, she would be welcomed into God’s divine presence.

I’m listening to The Bible in a Year podcast with Catholic Father Michael Smidt. In January we covered the book of Job (plus other books.) One of readings was Job 19:25-27 which is about suffering which both leads to death and to seeing the face of God.

Sophia, having survived the Russian invasion of Poland where most of her family was murdered or starved, knew a few things about unwanted and undeserved suffering.

Today, I dedicate these words of Job to Sophia... This Good News in a time of suffering.

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
27 whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
Oh how my heart faints within me!

AMEN

Hymn of Response: “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth”
Instrumental Medley [Annie Schulz]

Benediction: [Beth Woelk]

I send you into your week with these words of blessing woven together from the hymn “*I Know That My Redeemer Lives*”.

Know that your Redeemer lives!
Know the comfort this sweet sentence gives.
He lives, he lives, who once was dead. He lives, our ever-living Head.
He lives to bless us with his love. He lives to plead for us above.
He lives our hungry souls to feed. He lives to bless in times of need.
He lives to give us daily breath. He lives, and we shall conquer death.
He lives my kind, wise heav’nly friend. He lives and loves me to the end.
Know the sweet joy this sentence gives. “*I know that my Redeemer lives!*”

Sending Hymn: “Lo I am with You” [VT #284]

Lo, I am with you to the end of the world.
Lo, I am with you to the end of the world.
Lo, I am with you, Lo I am with you!
Lo I am with you to the end of the world.

Lo I am with you when you struggle for peace...

Lo, I am with you when you suffer for love...

Lo, I am with you in the darkness of death...