

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 4, 2018

Prayer of the Day

Stand watch over your family, O Lord, that we who depend entirely on your heavenly grace may always be protected in the mighty fortress of your love; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

First Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31

²¹Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²²It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; ²³who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. ²⁴Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. ²⁵To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. ²⁶Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. ²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. ³⁰Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Psalm 147:1-11

¹Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises | to our God!*
how pleasant it is to honor | him with praise!

²**The Lord re- | builds Jerusalem;***
he gathers the ex- | iles of Israel.

³He heals the | brokenhearted*
and binds | up their wounds.

⁴**He counts the number | of the stars***
and calls them all | by their names.

⁵Great is our Lord and migh- | ty in power;*

there is no limit | to his wisdom.

**⁶The Lord lifts | up the lowly,*
but casts the wicked | to the ground.**

⁷Sing to the Lord | with thanksgiving;*
make music to our God up-| on the harp.

**⁸He covers the heav- | ens with clouds*
and prepares rain | for the earth;**

⁹He makes grass to grow up- | on the mountains*
and green plants to | serve mankind.

**¹⁰He provides food for | flocks and herds*
and for the young ravens | when they cry.**

¹¹He is not impressed by the might | of a horse;*
he has no pleasure in the strength | of a man;

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-27

¹⁶For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. ¹⁹For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. ²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Gospel: Mark 1:29-39

²⁹Immediately {Jesus} left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. ³¹And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. ³²That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered together at

the door. ³⁴And he healed 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. ³⁵And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." ³⁹And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The Message: Obeying God's Call

Mark was most likely the first record of the good news in Christ Jesus to be written down, so it is interesting to see the tight, no-frills approach he uses in presenting the story. Mark jumps right in to the thick of it: no nativity stories; he takes only 5 sentences to tell about calling disciples; and then it's right into miraculous events. Last week we heard the first – about Jesus healing a demon-possessed man in the synagogue. Today he tells us of Jesus curing a woman of a fever.

We're given the impression that all this may be what this man Jesus is all about! His disciples and the crowds certainly think so. When Jesus retires to pray in solitude, the disciples track him down. I can almost hear them, can't you?

"Jesus, what are you doing out here? Come on, man – crowd's waiting! You're on a roll! Casting out demons, healing the sick! Don't disappoint them now! Give them what they need – give them what they clamor for! Be at their beck and call – you've got the gift, you've got the power – the mojo. Surely this is what God wants from you! Lord knows it's what we want!"

How can you argue with logic like that? People have needs – he had gifts. Healing the sick, relieving people from the misery of demonic possession, miraculously providing food for thousands from a few bread and fish: these are good things; these are important things! And the people are clamoring for them and for Jesus to deliver the goods! He's a success!

From the positive reaction of these early events, Jesus could have easily launched a hugely successful ministry of healing, fighting hunger, and teaching. He could have spent the rest of his earthly days enjoying being sought after, being the talk of the town, hearing his name in the market and synagogue.

So it's stunning to hear Jesus' response when the disciples come declaring, "Everyone's looking for you!" Listen to verses 36-38 again: ³⁶ *Simon and his companions went to look for him,* ³⁷ *and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"* ³⁸ *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."*

When the world comes clamoring for more of what it wants, Jesus essentially says, "Well, time to leave! I'm outa here!"

What Jesus knew and put into painful practice was that however good, or important some task or ministry might be, if it gets in the way of the primary mission God has called us to, then it becomes a stumbling block.

Healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry – these were all important in Jesus' day, too. And he did them! But he refused to let these good, important ministries distract him from his primary mission – proclaiming the message, the good news: God has come near – salvation is at hand! Remember the name he was given? The angel Gabriel told the young virgin, Mary, "You will call him Jesus for he will..." He will what? Feed the hungry? Heal the sick? No, "for he will save his people from their sins."

1 Peter 1:18 tells us, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

The Lutheran Confessions declare that "At great cost he has saved me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death and the power of the devil – not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death." That's what he came to do, that's the mission from which he refused to be distracted. Thanks be to God!

The world will always have good ideas for what it thinks the church ought to be doing. And make no mistake – they are good things; they are important things – and we need to do them! But despite how good and important they are, we cannot allow those clamorings to distract us from the primary mission to which God in Christ Jesus has called us, his bride – his Church. It is a mission that no one else on the planet can do. It is unique and it's not just important – it's critical. It's not just a matter of life and death. It's a matter of eternal life and eternal death!

The primary mission of the Church is to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything he has commanded.

Anyone can feed the hungry. Anyone can clothe the poor. Anyone can be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. That's the motto of the Boy Scouts!

But no one else on the planet can offer what the Church alone can offer. No one can extend what the church can: forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

As Lutherans we confess the authority of the scriptures - scriptures that declare we are saved through faith by grace alone. And we confess the authority of the scriptures that declares that faith in that saving grace comes by the Holy Spirit through God's Word. Nowhere else.

Your neighbor might be a great guy - give you the shirt off his back. She might be a wonderful, loving grandmother with nothing but kind words for everyone. They might be good, decent honorable people. But if that's all they have going for them - if they do not have faith in the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus - then their situation is catastrophic and they are in desperate need. And we - the church - have been called to proclaim and deliver the rescue! Not so that Mission in Christ will have more names on a list; not so more money will come into the offering plates. But because this is the place where they're going hear the words "*given for you...shed for you.*"

Thanks be to God!