

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, 4 February 2024
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[5 Epiphany, Year B: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39]

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

In the scriptures today, we hear a celebration of the divine energies of the creator pervading, guiding, sustaining, ordering all things: from the cosmic, to the political, to the personal. The God “who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in” is also the one “who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.” The one who “counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names” is the same one who calls us into community, who “rebuilds Jerusalem” and “gathers the exiles of Israel”, and more intimately still, who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

From the deepest intimacy of your heart, and mine, to the unimaginable distances of outer space, reaching back in time to the creation, all is pervaded by the presence of God, the energies of God, the wisdom of God. The one who orchestrates the expansive beauty, dynamism and fecundity of the natural world, who “covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth,” making “grass to grow upon the mountains and green plants to serve [hu]mankind” is the same one who “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

Great is our LORD and mighty in power; there is no limit to his wisdom. The LORD lifts up the lowly, but casts the wicked to the ground.

The divine energies, the dynamism that calls us into community, that heals our broken hearts and broken relationships; these are the same energies that hold

and sustain the universe, from the formation of stars to the intricate and various ecosystems that manifest the divine wisdom in the earth’s glorious biodiversity.

In these same texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, the human accumulation of *power over others* is revealed as an aberration to the divine plan. When oppressors are stripped of their power, and the wicked are toppled, this is revealed as the work of the same wisdom-energies of the Creator that pervade and sustain all of creation. That is divine wisdom.

Human oppression and domination are betrayals of the Creator’s intent: the vast interrelatedness, intimate mutuality and interdependence that we see all around us in nature—these are truer, wiser models of divine power, divine wisdom, and the divine intent for human life and human community.

Paul describes himself being caught up in this same dynamic wisdom-energy of mutuality and interdependence:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law... so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.

I think sometimes this has been interpreted as if Paul is talking about play-acting in some way, intentionally *pretending* to be like others in order to be able to persuade them. I think not. Rather, you could call it empathy, or really, something more

than empathy. I think Paul is talking about the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, the divine wisdom-energies that carried him along and that allowed him to discover a profound mutuality and common, vulnerable humanity with all these very different kinds of people.

It's a bit too easy to say that beneath the surface we are all the same. We are all unique, absolutely unique. But we share a common human nature, and God has planted the divine wisdom-energies within every human being, so that all of us already indwell one another, according to the Creator's mind and intent, and reflecting the Creator's own Being.

We are all infinitely unique, and we are all profoundly alike. We are alike because we all always already *belong* to one another; we all, always, already exist within one another. That is a given of creation. Jesus comes to call forth and heal and make manifest this profound and God-given mutuality and intimacy with one another and with all that is, to show that this mutual indwelling is in fact the core truth of our human nature. Because it's the core truth of the divine nature.

In today's gospel we see how the divine wisdom-energies flow forth from Jesus in what Mark presents as the first days of his public ministry. Simon's mother-in-law is laid low with a fever, and Jesus takes her by the hand—one human hand to another—and raises her up. Jesus calls forth the divine energies that are already there in her; her fever departs, and she is energized to *serve* them.

These same men that Simon's mother-in-law waits on today will have much to learn about *διακονία* (*diakonia*), service; Jesus will have to spell it out for them: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Not to be served but to serve; this might serve as a succinct statement of what Paul refers to as "Christ's law" in the epistle today, and here it is Simon's mother in law who enacts the law of Christ: not to be served, but to serve.

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Between the exorcism in the synagogue (last week's gospel) and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, word spreads quickly, and, as Mark puts it,

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. 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.

Remember, this is the very beginning of Jesus's public ministry. Things aren't clear yet: What will that ministry look like? How will it *work*?

Well, you've got the whole city at Simon's door; why not build on *that*? Why not set up a base of operations at Simon's house? As word spreads, people will come from far and wide. Of course, that will be a lot to manage. Simon and his family and friends can help with that—in fact they'll be very busy, and there will be wear and tear on the property.

It would only make sense to at least have, say, a donation box, and someone will need to manage those donations, and perhaps someone to remind people to give. Maybe some neighbors might object, but others would see opportunity: all those people need to eat, and need a place to sleep. They'll probably want some kind of memento of their Capernaum pilgrimage, so you'll need a souvenir shop, or two, or three, as well. This might be just the boost that Capernaum needs!

It's easy to miss, because we pretty much know how the story goes from here, but what Mark describes here is not only a story of healing power, but also a potential trajectory for Jesus's career: a local healer, at a local healing and renewal center, a boost to the local economy, managed and brokered of course by Simon and his household and his friends.

Something like that was absolutely an option.

But Jesus is up and *out of there* before sun-up next morning: he needs a quiet, deserted place to pray, to connect deeply to his Source, to those wisdom-energies of the Creator. Simon and friends get up

and discover Jesus is AWOL, and they *hunt him down*, says the Greek. When they find him and say “Everyone is searching for you!”, truer words were never spoken, but what they mean is, “Let’s get back to *where they can find you—at Simon’s house*—let’s get back there and keep this thing going!”

And Jesus’s pointed reply is obscured a bit in the translation we heard. What Jesus says is, “Let us go *somewhere else*, into the neighboring towns, that there too I may make my proclamation.”¹ Let us go *somewhere else*. Almost like, *anywhere* but Simon and Andrew’s house, *anywhere* but Capernaum. So Jesus scuttles the whole plan that seemed so apparent the day before. His will be a ministry, a *διακονία* that is first of all a proclamation, a *κήρυγμα*, a proclamation-ministry always on the move, crossing boundaries, confounding expectations, creating community, showing forth the divine energies in service, not the accumulation of power.

What Jesus brings is not only healing, but a message, a proclamation that will transform human life, top to bottom and inside out.

The healing and casting out of demons *belong* to the proclamation, the message: they *go with* the teaching, they *mean* something, they *say* something about who God is and what God is doing—setting creation free!—and they say something about who *we* are and how we can be caught up in and transformed by the divine wisdom-energies of the Creator, healing and restoring all things.

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 65.