

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It 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 live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 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. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'? Have 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. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those 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.

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, 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.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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It's important to understand something about Simon's mother-in-law. In rising and beginning "to serve them," she wasn't taking up menial tasks. (Not that there's any shame in the performance of menial tasks. They need doing, after all.) But this wasn't about subservience on the part of Simon's mother-in-law. This was about self-giving. This wasn't about exploitation, but

about giving of a sudden abundance of power. Empowerment! She'd been raised, after all, which might have made her full to overflowing, in a sudden state of being able to act, to respond, to serve.

"We can do it," declared Rosy the Riveter, suddenly empowered. Maybe Simon's mother-in-law said something similar.

Has that ever been you?

"Whom shall I send?" the Lord wondered just prior to the prophet Isaiah's response, "Here I am! Ready! Send me."

Has that ever been you?

I remember once a group of elderly women were gathered in conversation. I was nearby. One of them suddenly collapsed. Her legs just gave way, and her friends were agitated, pained at their inability to help. I hurried over, hooked my arms into the collapsed woman's arm pits and lifted her to her walker that doubled as a chair.

She was heavy, as every body is when unable to lift itself at all.

It was the same movement for me lifting her, the same movement as goes into a rowing stroke, as it happens, the very same movement I practice over and over again, on the water, on the erg, for the mostly stupid purpose of moving a boat swiftly across the water should I ever find myself in some distant future back in a boat with seven other rowers at a start line.

I remember once, during a race, a sprint, a coxswain yelling as we closed in the boat just ahead of us, "Liz! I need you!" as if she could tell I hadn't been giving it my all. Hands blistered, lactic acid mounting in my legs, rowing is a strange sort of suffering.

We won that race.

More importantly, I lifted that woman. Her friends chirped and praised me. I felt like a superhero.

The Greek word used here to narrate the sudden service of Simon's mother-in-law is *diakonai*. It gives us the whole concept that is the diaconate and gives us the cohort that is the deacons—the people who see to the spiritual life of a congregation. They prepare the communion elements. They set the numbers on the hymn board. They prepare the ashes for Ash Wednesday and the candles for Maundy Thursday. The good order of the church: the deacons.

The term is one Mark uses two other times in his narrative.

One of those times follows when James and John asked about sitting next to Jesus at the table in glory, one at his right hand and one at his left. Jesus' reply reveals that James and John were imagining it all wrong, which Jesus could see. Jesus' work and status weren't to lord over and to be served, but to love and to serve.

So, Jesus called together all his disciples and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There's a surprising glory in the sort of serving imagined here, or in the task of serving. There's a surprising power in it.

To serve comes from an overabundance of power, not from a dynamic of exploitation or coercion.

The other time Mark uses the term comes just after Jesus has breathed his last, and the Temple curtain has been torn in two. This was to suggest that what had once been to separate the people from the utter and absolute presence of God, what had once been meant to *safeguard* the people from the utter and absolute presence of God, was no longer. It had been torn in two, this Temple curtain. It had been torn in two, this protective layer between God and the world. So, now the presence of God would be felt to full and overflowing.

For what it's worth, this presence was felt to have been utter in Jesus. According to Mark, this presence implied in the tearing of the Temple curtain was purported to have been absolute and immediate in Jesus. Jesus as God's presence absolute and immediately manifest! This is the message the bringing of which he set forth throughout the region of Galilee: this, that the kingdom of heaven had come near, that the reign of God was occurring in Jesus. So, we should repent, expand our minds and thinking, get lost in wonder, love, and praise. This is the message whose bringing he'd come to do.

Once the Temple curtain was torn in two. then Jesus breathed his last, and a centurion standing nearby recognized, "Truly, this man was God's son." And who knows? Maybe this centurion was one who'd hammered in the nails, or maybe he was just nearby overseeing all the

crucifixions—for there were many, following which Mark noted, “There were also women looking on from a distance... These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee...”

Diakonai. This is the sort of serving that comes of an encounter with the truth, the sort of serving that comes of an urgent need to participate in that movement of truth, that occurrence of God’s reign.

What in your life has provoked in you a desire to serve? When in your life have you been exactly the right person set there to serve? More to the point, what in your life has given rise in you a willingness to suffer for this thing that you serve?

That’s called passion, by the way. Passion, the Latin, *passio*, is suffering, enduring. So, the thing or things in your life for which you’re willing to suffer for the doing of them: what are these things for you? For what are you willing to suffer?

Not that the suffering has to be great, mind you. Just that the doing of these things isn’t merely about pleasure or benefit. It comes at some cost. It’s difficult, this thing that’s a passion of yours. It requires of you some endurance, and it benefits something beyond yourself.

We’ve been told this sort of thing doesn’t come naturally to us. The story of humanity for the last century or two, or four, has been that we’re naturally brutal, naturally selfish. We’re a bunch of survivalists, every man for himself. John Locke imagined all this as the state of nature, the state of *our* nature, even. Ever on the brink of the war of all against all: that’s us, according to John Locke.

And so, it might be—that given half the chance we’d all be reduced to this brutality, and the world would be subsumed by pandemonium.

Certainly, we’ve seen evidence of this lately: pandemonium. The Capitol riots.

As it happens, that word, pandemonium, is an outgrowth of the word demon. Dante came up with it for his epic poem *Inferno*. But it’s made its way into common imagining, naming a phenomenon we might now shy away from understanding as supernatural. But who can deny that it arises with frightening and mysterious power? I mean, what made that group of regular people in D.C. use a fire extinguisher to beat a police officer to death? And maybe John Locke would say it was our base nature, that was simply our base nature on full display. I would argue otherwise. I would argue that state of mindless brutality had long been cultivated. Those people had been stirred up, had been riled up. Either way, we might not usefully imagine this as the result of

demons per se. But pandemonium seems like a useful word here, useful in part because it reveals what was at stake for all those people now coming to Jesus, all those people amidst all those villages who were said to be suffering demons.

Jesus, in casting these demons out, was curing a sort of social dis-ease, and establishing a good order, which is work the Church can continue in the doing.

When I was a younger adult, and just starting out in ministry, I remember an older colleague, nearing retirement, mentioning which was his favorite hymn. *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*. He loved it especially for this line: “Let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace,” and he loved especially that line for the image of living an orderly life.

I remember this because I thought it was weird. Orderliness had just never felt all that compelling. On the contrary, it felt like something oppressive. People who are “just following orders” aren’t generally doing good things. “Law and order” is so often code for authoritarian tendencies and even abuse of power. A good order sounded prescriptive to me, even invasive. Colonists think they’re bringing good order to otherwise “savages.” Civilization is itself held up as good order, all while it mows down so much that’s also good in its coming. On a smaller scale, the mannered way of good order can feel judgey—using the right spoon lest shame befall you, wearing the right jacket for the right time of day, otherwise...

I tucked the idea away, though: our ordered lives confessing the beauty of God’s peace. I tucked it away and pondered it from time to time.

Turns out a good order can be a way into good relationship. You can’t move a boat speedily across the water with seven other people unless you’ve established a good order with them. You can’t allocate goods and services as people need them without establishing a good order as to whom and how. You can’t access your deepest self and bring it to others for connection and care without being able to think and to reflect and to speak. You can’t worship God, who is goodness and beauty and love; you can’t worship with other people in the absence of a good order by which is held the power and the vulnerability at work in true worship, at play in true worship. And you can’t recover from raw disorder absent a way to come back into clarity and a right mind.

All these demon-possession stories, all these demon-dis-possession stories: the question so often comes to them, what are we to do with these? What does this thing that Jesus is remembered so often to have done, and most especially in this gospel, Mark: what does it have to do with us

these days? I for one have never witnessed any such thing as these. I for one have never done any such thing as these—and as one who seeks to follow Jesus, as Mark’s gospel especially would have us do (“Follow me.” “Come after me.”), I for one am at a loss as to what to do about this.

Except to say that we’re doing it right now. Worship, orderly worship, word and music, prayer and silence: turns out we’re doing it right now, a dispossession of pandemonium, a filling up of holiness and peace. We’re doing it right now, this thing that I for one have needed more now than ever, now that so many other orderings of things have fallen away.

And that’s no coincidence, if you ask me. The fact that so many other orderings of things have fallen away; the fact that now comes an uprising riot. Pandemic and pandemonium have been helpmeets of each other—the *demos* of pandemic and the *daimon* of pandemonium not merely sounding alike, but in mutual service, each of the other. The lack of so much of people’s lives has made us crazy.

It’s a good Sunday, then, for gathering at the Lord’s table.

It’s a good Sunday for us each to serve as deacons in the good ordering of God’s gifts of bread and wine.

True, the way we’ve gathered for the eucharist in the past isn’t a way we can do it now. But good order isn’t good for its own sake. It’s good for its serving the good. So, for now, we each on our own, or within our own households, take and bless and break and eat as a foretaste of when we shall do it together again—this itself a foretaste of God’s glory where all shall be gathered in and made full.

Thanks be to God.