

On Eagles' Wings

Isaiah 40:21-31 & Mark 1:29-45

February 7, 2021

Last Tuesday was Groundhog Day. I didn't know that it had a Christian story. According to the Pennsylvania Tourism Office, Romans took the early Christian holiday Candlemas to Germany, where it was said that if there was enough sun on Candlemas Day for a badger to cast a shadow, there would be six more weeks of bad weather. German immigrants brought this tradition to Pennsylvania, and in 1886 the editor of Punxsutawney's newspaper teamed up with a group of groundhog hunters to begin the legend of Punxsutawney Phil's weather forecast. So, in the United States and Canada, we celebrate Groundhog Day on the same date Christians across the globe celebrate Candlemas. Do you know what is Candlemas? Candlemas is a Christian holy day commemorating the presentation of Jesus at the temple and encountered Simeon and Anna. I don't understand how the feast of the presentation of Jesus became Roman holyday of weather forecast using an animal, and then became American iconic movie, Groundhog Day, the 1993 film starring Bill Murray as disgruntled Channel 9 weatherman Phil Connors, who is forced to cover a weather-predicting "rat" for the fourth straight year. In the movie he wakes up day after day, with a foreboding sense of *déjà vu*. Everyday is the same and there is nothing new and exciting. Phil says, "Well, what if there is no tomorrow? There wasn't one today." On this year's Groundhog Day in our house Chris and I looked at each other in the morning and said, "Oh well, it is Groundhog Day, the same day again. All blurs days." It feels like we lost the vigor of life. In this pandemic we truly feel everyday is the same and there is no tomorrow because there wasn't one today. We are weary and tired, mentally and physically during these ongoing blurs days. We need Jesus' healing miracles. But do we really believe that his healing miracles are real and possible for us? Or do we think Jesus' healing miracles are just stories in the ancient book, the Bible? If we believe, and have longings for Jesus' healing miracles for now, for you and me, and for the whole world, what does it mean and how does it look like?

One day Jesus was in Peter's house. They had a busy day and came home to rest, but Peter's mother-in-law was lying down in bed with fever. She was isolated in her bed away from her family and from all activities that she did for her family before the illness. We don't know how long she has been lying down in the bed with fever. She is out of the vigor of life. When you have fever, you are weary, weak, and exhausted. I heard that one of main symptoms of coronavirus illness is fever. When I read this Bible passage to prepare this sermon, I thought of people in the world who have been lying down with fever during this pandemic. They are literally in their beds away from their families and from all activities they did before. They are out of the vigor of life. Weariness is not just personal and physical experience when people get sick. Scholars believe that Isaiah chapters 40 to 55 was written at the end of the Babylonian exile. The Israelites were physically, emotionally, and spiritually weary during the fifty years of exile in the foreign land. They had to learn the foreign language, food, culture, custom, and religion. Everything was changed. When they got sick, they didn't have the medicine, priests, and caregivers that they knew and had in their homeland. They prayed to their God, but they felt God didn't hear their prayers and there was no God. They were weary. They were out of the vigor of life.

Even before the current pandemic happened, we witnessed that people got weary of their religion, their churches and God whom they learned in their childhood. When people leave their churches nowadays, they usually don't seek or search for another church. They are out of the vigor of faith that once they had. Most young people do not seek the vigor of life in religions anymore. Today I don't want to analyze why people got weary of church and what we need to do with them and for them. Like fever, it may just happen without any warning or reasons, as Peter's mother-in-law got sick. She got sick and what analysis does she need from us? Also, people get weary when the whole nation or the society and culture experience changes like Israelites did in Babylon exile. Everything under the Sun changes. We can have one million analyses about the changes of culture, value system, and religions but they are not helpful for the weary. Weariness happens. Jesus knew that. The prophet Isaiah knew that.

Jesus didn't ask Peter's mother-in-law about what she did to catch the fever. Jesus just went to her bed, held her hand, and raised her up. If it is a miracle story of healing of her illness, the author of the Gospel of Mark didn't need to say she got up and out of the bed. It could say the fever was gone, and she got cured from her illness. That's enough. But Mark says she was not only cured and out of bed but also began to serve the disciples. Do you see the point? Jesus restored the vigor of life in her. Some feminist scholars criticize that Mark puts her in the position to serve male disciples even after her illness and it was not just. I understand their point. People sometimes read the Bible literally and ask or teach that women's role in family and church is serving others not teaching or leading, because the Bible says so. That's why many churches don't ordain women. I want to say two things about it. First, when Peter's mother-in-law was cured from the fever and recovered energy, she wanted to do something meaningful for her which was taking care of people. Jesus recovered the vigor, energy, and joy of her life, not assigning her to work in the certain areas of life. This miracle story shows Jesus' love, understanding, and care for the woman as a whole person. We have doctors, nurses, and health care workers who cure our illness, but they do not recover the vigor of life for us. Second, Jesus said, he came to serve others not to be served. In him there is no difference between teaching or leading and serving. He never intended to separate men and women between leading and serving roles. I am a member of DCOM, a district committee on Ministries. We mentor, care for, and interview ordination or certification of local pastor candidates. Though we worry that churches are declining, and young people don't go to seminaries, our district, because of Garrett Seminary, has many candidates. I am so thankful and excited that those young people still find their calling to ministry. I believe more than half of candidates of our district are LGBTQ persons. When they hear the committee recognizes their calling and recommends them to the next step of ordination process, they cry and sometimes I cry too. I am shocked and delighted to see the vigor of faith in those young LGBTQ Christians. Once we lost them and now we found them. Many of them seek to be deacons of the church who bridges the church with the society. They want to serve the people not only in the church but also in the society and community as ordained ministers. Truly, they are the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah delivered God's voice to the weary Israelites who were in the exile to see and meet God the Creator. He says, "Look at up the sky and consider who created these? Why do you say my God ignores my sufferings?" Isaiah assures that God doesn't grow tired or weary and God gives power to the tired and exhausted. The promise is those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength and they will fly up on wings like eagles. In Jesus' healing ministry for the weary and the sick, this promise came true that Jesus not only cures the ill but restores the vigor of faith and life in them. Now it is our turn to hold Jesus'

hand, get up and to serve the world that Jesus loved so much with the strength, vigor, and energy coming from the Healer and the Lord, Jesus. Thanks be to God.