

Epiphany V B  
February 4, 2018

Grace/Lexington  
Fr. James

*Isaiah 40:21-31 Psalm 147 I Corinthians 9:16-23 Mark 1:29-39*

## **No Volunteers among the People of God**

I am not sure when it was that I first realized that there are no volunteers in the church. It was many years ago, and perhaps it followed some soul in one of my congregations reminding me that 'after we are all volunteers.' But I had been clear in my own mind for many years, long before I finally said 'yes' to the Lord's insistence that I prepare for ministry that I was no volunteer. I never volunteered for this, and the coming understanding that nobody else had either was perhaps just the extension of my own experience.

In today's lessons, I see some of that understanding clearly. "In 538 BCE, a combined force of Medes and Persians entered the city of Babylon, having previously

defeated the Babylonian military might. During the decade before the collapse of Babylonian rule, the prophecies that make up chapters 40-55 of Isaiah were written. They show a remarkable similarity of mood and character and are, with only minor exceptions, attributed to a single prophet. They express in richly poetic language a message of comfort, addressed primarily to Jerusalem, but also to the scattered remnants of the former Israel. They assure the readers that God is Creator and Lord of history. Israel's past experience demonstrate this; the fulfillment of earlier prophecies bears witness to it; and current events confirm it. The prophet points to the rise of Cyrus, the Persian ruler whose victories put an end to Babylon's domination. Unbelief, despair and idolatry are all condemned as neglect of the one true God. This emphatic focus on the

sole deity of the Lord God of Israel makes these chapters the most forthright declaration of monotheism in the Hebrew Scriptures [p. 923 NRSV, Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, General Editors].

Our reading this morning beginning at vs. 21 of Isaiah chapter 40, is part of four challenges the prophet raises to the people of Israel and Judah. They are challenges not unlike those raised in the ancient Book of Job comparing the uninspiring human with the greatness and magnificence of the Creator. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Hast it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? Known what? Heard what? Told what? Understood what? That God alone creates, sustains, observes and judges the inhabitants of the earth. Nothing is hid from this God. Why then 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. And not only that, 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.

There is no room for the volunteer here. God is LORD. He will bring comfort to his people, but that is not the same as excusing them from living faithfully before him. They have been judged and have already been removed from their pleasant living, and indeed are

captives in Babylon. That is no excuse for not serving God where they are, however.

Jesus is living and moving among his people 500 years later. The Jewish people are not captive in Babylon, they did return to Jerusalem with their own government and now, in Jesus time, they are right back under the thumb of a foreign government, only this time it is Rome, Rome, more powerful than Babylon ever pretended to be. Still there is no time for volunteers. Jesus was not in fact a volunteer. He may have assented in coming as Paul suggests when he writes to the Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in

human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross [2:5-8]. He made a choice, but he did not see himself as a volunteer.

Paul is no volunteer. “If I proclaim the Gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting for an obligation is laid on me.” Volunteers have no obligation. “Let this same mind be in you.”

In Mark 1, our Gospel for today, Jesus had been in the synagogue, the teaching arm of the Jewish religious institution. There Jesus taught with authority, you may remember, he had cast out a demon from the man possessed after being challenged by the dirty spirit possessing the man. Upon leaving they went to Peter's house and finding Peter's mother-in-law ill with a fever, Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.

She was healed and went to work serving those with her in the house. My wife cannot abide this passage. Right, she says, she goes right back to work serving those around her. Her resentment is partly from the fact that that is exactly what she would do. Note that it was not asked by Jesus. He does not take responsibility for her behavior, following his act of giving her back her health. Actually, once he defended Mary, Martha's sister for not going to the kitchen. A note from me. If Jesus had walked in off the streets and healed my fever, I would have been delighted to go to work in the kitchen, or go fishing for a meal or whatever. On the other hand, Peter's mother in law understands fully that she is no volunteer. Jesus has his work and she has hers. And, as you already know, my guess is that she is so delighted in feeling well, that she has no resentment about serving others.

Jesus goes on from there and spends the rest of the day healing the whole city. Now this may be a slight exaggeration. We can probably assume that not everyone in Capernaum is sick or filled with a demon, but we know from our own experience that there are many people with enormous needs in every community. Within our own small congregation of souls, Woody, Buster, Libby, and Pierson Hotchkiss have been in the hospital. Helen, both Fr. And Mrs.            and Barbara Yewell are recovering from falls. Chip Schram and George Brooke are fighting cancer, Phil Peters has been moved to advanced care at Kendell, and I could go on about other continuing needs. I would not even attempt to catalogue those of us who have relationships that need the healing touch of a caring hand. It is not an exaggeration to write that the whole city was gathered around his door and



with them were the diseased, the mentally upset, the sinfully disarranged and Jesus cured many of them, not as a volunteer, but as One sent by God his father to express the concern, salvation and freedom to be found in serving God. He chose, but he chose as one who has an obligation to choose.

The following morning early, before daylight, he slips out of the house to wait upon the Lord. In the words of our Psalm, he practices “How good it is to sing praises to our God! How pleasant it is to honor him with praise! Jesus recognizes that The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds, and he does it with human hands, hands like Jesus' hands. He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names. Great is our Lord and mighty in power. This is the stuff of prayer, and I

imagine it was the stuff of Jesus prayer in the blackness of that early morning before the sun's rise. "Great is our LORD and mighty in power, and having rest through the night, he takes new spiritual strength for the day ahead in singing to the LORD with thanksgiving, worshipping the LORD of heaven until his companions show up to say, Where have you been? Everyone is looking for you. And Jesus, renewed in spirit and in body, says, "No" to their demands. He is not called to meet every need, to fulfill every demand, to please every person. That doesn't mean he is free to go on a vacation like I might. No, he says, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I can proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." He was not just a volunteer who might stop proclaiming God's good news simply because he chose to be God's person. And neither are you. Each

one of you including me is called of God. We did not ask for the call, and we have the choice to respond to it, but once we have responded we are not free to carry on life as if we had not responded. Look into your own hearts and see whether or not that is not so. Think about volunteering for military service. How much of a volunteer are you once you have been inducted?

Gorman Williams spent most of his life as a missionary to India. In 1945 he purchased tickets for a long-awaited vacation back to the United States. He had counted down the months and days until he would be home. A few days before he was to leave he heard about some Jews who had escaped the wrath of the Nazis. They had traveled by boat to India seeking refuge. Since it was a time of global war, the Indian government denied their

request to immigrate. They were granted permission to stay for a short time in the lofts of the buildings near the dock. Their living conditions were wretched. But it was better than being sent to a concentration camp in Germany. It was Christmas Eve when Gorman Williams heard about the plight of these Jews. Immediately he went to the dock, entered the first building and called out, "Merry Christmas! What would you like for Christmas?" The response was slow. "We're Jewish," someone called out. "I know," Williams said, "but what would you like for Christmas?" The weary Jews, fearful for their very lives, replied, "We would like some German pastries."

At that point Gorman Williams sold his ticket to the United States and purchased more German pastries than anyone had ever seen. He brought lots and lots of

them and carried them in large baskets.

Later he told this story to a group of students. One brash, judgmental young man reprimanded him. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, "they were not even Christians." "No they weren't," the wise missionary quietly replied, "but I am."

King Duncan, [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)

*Yes we are. So be it.*