

Sermon: *Want More Strength? Wait for the Lord.*
(an unpopular message about patience)
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 2.4.24

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

I don't like waiting. Patience does not come easy to me. I would prefer strength coming from strength building exercises; like, you know, exercise. Doing something. But, repeated in our reading from Isaiah and the Psalm and even the Gospel, strength comes to those who wait. Occasionally, the diocesan clergy get together for a retreat. Many of my colleagues would like to go off to a monastery and sit in quiet and stare at a tree. No, not me; I'd be the one hanging out in the cafeteria, with my friends, making jokes, writing prayers, and talking about pastoral leadership. You know, doing something. But, Scripture tells us that is not where strength comes from. This message is about from where that strength comes and when.

I have a friend, a parishioner; she shares in my nature of doing something. She is very active, she's on the altar guild, and does all sorts of things in the community. She recently had shoulder surgery. It has required that both arms be immobilized; and, from what I can tell, it is difficult for her to operate a remote, or her phone; she can't drive; all she can do is wait, patiently, for her body to heal. And heal it will; eventually. It seems that the older we get, the longer it takes for our body to heal. Like patience is a test and we get to keep taking it more often the older we get.

The lesson from Isaiah seems to be talking to people like me and my parishioner who likes to do things. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Those who wait will be strengthened. We know now that the body refreshes and restores when we rest. The brain requires a restful sleep. Our joints, muscles and our psyche need to rest. When our body rests, it strengthens. Thus, those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.

When I worked for the insurance company, several of us had a hectic business trip scheduled in Boise, Idaho. When the four of us got to the gate, the plane was delayed an hour. Three of us freaked out. We started calling and emailing and seeing what we could do to shorten our trip by an hour and then spend time working at the airport. The fourth member of the team; he smiled when he heard the plane was delayed. Instead of fretting and seeing what type of work he could get done, he sat in one of those seats that looks over the tarmac and watched planes take off and land. That's it. He didn't do anything! He just sat there; relaxed. Wouldn't you know it, when we finally arrived in Boise, he had the most energy, the most strength for handling the changing schedule of our day. The rest of us were frazzled when we got there; but not him, he was renewed and strengthened.

Have you ever been delayed at the airport? Yeah, I think we all have. And will again. You know there is going to be some volcano in Iceland with a name that has twenty vowels in it that is going to erupt and cause massive delays on all flights to and from the east coast. It's just going to happen. We can learn, to trust, to wait for the Lord, to wait patiently, and to have our strength renewed.

This is a good place to end the sermon. But you know me; I can't stop here. I need to run this idea along. I want to look at it through the life and message of Jesus. Specifically, I want to know if Jesus, who was always on the move, took time to be patient and to wait. What can we learn from him about this principle.

The answer is yes, Jesus did take time to rest and to pray and to contemplate. He routinely did it; and, if you look closely, Jesus would rest right before important times in his life. It was like he would take time to rest and then become the mover and shaker that we know. Yet, it all started with rest and patience. If Jesus had to wait and be patient, if Jesus had to do this, well then so do I and so do you.

The first instance of this in Mark's Gospel is right after he was baptized (and the heavens tore open, the Spirit, like a dove descended upon him and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved, my son, in whom I am well pleased."). He immediately went away, by himself, to commune with God. When he returned, he said, "Metanoia, the Kingdom of God has come near!" In Lent, shortly, I will be preaching perhaps several times on "metanoia" so stay tuned for that, or perhaps be patient and wait for it.

Jesus then called his disciples, went into a synagogue, preached (with authority!) and drove an unclean spirit out of a man. Then, where today's Gospel begins, he went to Peter's house where his mother in law was sick. Jesus healed her and then the whole town came to him with sick and people possessed. The Gospel writer, Mark, seems to be in a hurry, or is giving us bullet points of Jesus' life, message and ministry. I think he wants us to fill in the blanks, so here's one I'd like to look at: how did the people in the town know to bring the sick to Peter's house? He healed one person, the Mother-in-Law, and suddenly everyone shows up. How did they find out he was a healer?

I think it happened this way: Peter's mother-in-law; she's unnamed, let's call her Evelyn. So Evelyn, seeing that the rabbi and his "companions" (as Mark names them) are all assembled at her house. She'd have to go to the market for supplies. At the market she sees her friend, let's call her Joanne, who says, "Evelyn, you look great. I thought you were on your death bed!" Evelyn then tells her that Jesus healed her and he's at her house right now. Joanne told; let's come up with another name, how about Miriam (there are lots of Marys in the New Testament); Joanne tells Miriam and the word spreads quickly so that after supper time, the whole town shows up at Evelyn's house.

The longer I am in pastoral ministry the more I realize that everyone needs some sort of healing in their life; either for themselves or for someone they love; everyone needs healing. And Jesus provides it – to the whole town.

Early in the morning the next day, he gets up, goes off by himself and finds rest... and strength. The disciples “hunt” for him and when they find him (he wasn’t hiding, just praying, contemplating, resting) they exclaim, “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus says, “I must go to other towns because this is what I came out to do.” I think in praying, resting, contemplating, Jesus got the strength to continue this ministry in other towns. Wouldn’t it be great to live in a town where everyone was healed, and restored, and happy and content? Wouldn’t that be great. I think a tired, go-getting, Jesus, would have preferred that; but, with resting and prayer, he had the strength to do the teaching and healing pattern from town to town. I’ve been at healing conferences and prayer evenings where person after person came up for laying on of hands and anointing. I’ve done this where the sick, and even a person with an unclean spirit, came forward. It’s a wonderful one-on-one time. I’m sure Jesus would have loved that; but, with rest and prayer and patience, he had the strength to do this from town to town.

One more piece of the puzzle to consider – the traditional reading for Ash Wednesday includes this phrase from Jesus: *when you pray, go into your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret; your Father who sees you in secret will reward you.*

The reward Jesus is talking about is not gold coins. I think the reward is strength. Those who go into their inner room and pray – rest, contemplate – will be strengthened. The interesting thing about this is excavation sites from Galilean towns in the 1st century show plenty of homes but none of them have an inner room. They are small; utilitarian; and held, most likely, a couple of generations of people – but no inner room. Unlike our homes today, if you had a tornado warning, you are supposed to go to the inner room of your house – the one without windows – and wait. The houses in Jesus’ day didn’t have it. This tells me the inner room is metaphoric or an allegory. The inner room is inside each of us. This goes with the theology of the inner-God who lives, in a room, inside of each of us.

My friend, Tom, who also had shoulder surgery and had to have his right arm immobilized with his arm at a 90-degree angle from the body; just like the parishioner I was telling you about; Deacon Tom is a prison chaplain. He believes that every one of his parishioners, the inmates, have an inner room where God lives. Some of his people, however, have placed a lot of metaphoric furniture and junk in front of the door to their inner room. Tom, the chaplain, serves as a moving company who helps get the stuff out of the way so that the door to that inner room can be opened.

Remember my work colleague who was excited that our plane was delayed? The next day, on our way back, at the airport, I asked him about his reaction to the delayed plane and why he sat by himself and watched planes take off and land. He responded with this: there is an inner room inside of me where God lives. When I experience a delay, or something that requires patience, I

sit and imagine myself entering that room with God. We both watched planes come and go. I prayed for each one and all the passengers on them. I told God directly that I was pleased to see the beauty of the day and to have some time to spend with him; quite unexpectedly; but I was happy about it. Every time I spend time in that room, I feel refreshed.

For all of us who are waiting, or needing to have patience in our life, Isaiah reminds us that strength comes to those who wait. Jesus – Jesus himself – had to take time to rest, to pray, to contemplate, and it gave him strength. So, for us, there is an inner room in our body and soul. Enter that room and talk to God. By doing so, as Isaiah tells us, *that the Lord gives power to the faint; the Lord strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be wary; the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.*

Those who wait; those who contemplate, those who enter in that space in their heart; will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.