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Texts: Isaiah 40.21-3,
 Psalm 147.1-11, 20c
 1 Corinthians 9.16-23
 Mark 1.29-39

As you read Mark describe these early days of Jesus' ministry, do you feel the same sense of urgency that I do as I listen to his gospel? Listen to the transitions between each scene Mark describes. Jesus is baptized and the Spirit IMMEDIATELY drove him into the desert where he was tempted.¹ Jesus emerges from this dark night of the soul and passes along the Sea of Galilee. He sees Simon and Andrew and calls them and IMMEDIATELY they leave their nets and follow him.² They continue together and come upon James and John and Jesus IMMEDIATELY calls them to join the mission.³ Last week we read about when they come to Capernaum. Jesus enters the synagogue to teach and the people are astounded by his power and by his authority. Today we read, AS SOON AS THEY LEFT THE SYNAGOGUE,⁴ Jesus enters the house of Simon whose mother-in-law is sick and in need of healing.

You can just feel the mounting urgency in the telling of the story. You can feel how much work there is to do in the kingdom of God; how much human suffering Jesus encountered; and how much teaching he needed to do. If you listen to what is happening in the world today you feel that very same sense of urgency. Unemployment is at its highest levels since 1982. On page ten of our bulletin today you can read how the food bank and community kitchen are having record crowds despite diminishing supplies. I heard someone this week talking about their home country in western Africa where a civil war ten years ago left thousands of amputees. The government promised to provide support for these families and has placed them in housing settlements. Only the settlements are cut off from community, support and resources. The person telling me about this is planning to gather some of these stories so the world might put some pressure on the government to live up to the promises they made to these victims.

¹ Mark 1.12

² Mark 1.18

³ Mark 1.20

⁴ Mark 1.29

These texts throughout the season of Epiphany keep bringing us back round to the enormous call that God places on our lives to respond to these pressing needs we encounter in the world. Paul, in our text today, describes what he's willing to do on behalf of the gospel. And the question that seems to linger is: so what about you? What are you going to do?

I attended the Calvin Symposium on Worship last weekend. Whenever I go to gatherings like that I walk away with this overwhelming sense of responsibility – this deep awareness that there is so much more I could be doing. Just look at this symposium program! There were over 100 workshops offered all of which encourage you as someone who plans worship to expand how you think about that task. All of them invite you to reach more people, to worship more creatively, to engage people in deeper ways. And this is just one area of church life. There are conferences like this for Christian education, social justice, prayer and spirituality. In many ways attending these conferences is inspiring and refreshing....and in *other* ways can leave you just feeling exhausted. There is so much to think about. There is so much that God is asking from us who claim to follow Christ. There is so much that God seeks to do to bring peace and grace and love to our broken lives and broken world.

So in our text when Jesus slips out to be by himself to pray, Simon hunts him down and reminds him of all the people who still need healing....that everyone is looking for him. Jesus' response is to say "It's time for us to move on...this isn't the place God wants me to be." How should we read this text today? What does it mean that people coming to Jesus in Capernaum with incredible burdens were left behind unhealed and untended? Does it mean that they shouldn't have asked? Does it mean that Jesus in some way didn't care about them?

Some have looked at this text and see in Jesus an ability to hold a larger vision for God's kingdom and an ability to move forward toward that vision. *Resisting the demands* placed on him, Jesus presses forward to follow after the call God has placed on his life. They see this as a model for ministry that the church needs to adopt if it is to remain vital in the face of all the competing demands placed on the church today. There is a whole body of literature out there about how church leaders need to hold out a vision for where the church is going. Even if members of their congregation do not share that vision, they should press onward. Anyone who does not get on board should just be left behind. They point to texts

like these as evidence that Jesus himself adopted that kind of unyielding drive - that sense of urgency - that the kingdom is at hand and there is so much to do.

Whether you look at Jesus in verse 38 as a bold, visionary leader or whether you wonder where his compassion had gone probably has to do with where you see yourself in this story. Do you recognize your own face among the crowds that filled the doorway of Simon's house needing to feel some healing power? Or do you identify more with Jesus himself feeling the needs of people pressing in from every direction and you just want a moment to breathe and rest and collect yourself?

I wonder if part of how we should read this text today is to see the ways that everyone in this story was offering themselves to God: from the clamoring needs of the crowd to the nervous disciples not wanting anyone to go unnoticed to Jesus both when he was clear and determined and when he was worn out and in need of some peace and prayer. When we read these stories of call week after week, you may walk away thinking that the strong, determined Jesus of verse 38 is the only one in this story offering something to God that is worth anything.

Our response to God's call is important - what we give to God in terms of our service and our gifts is vitally important. But if we think that the life of faith is only about what we give to God then we have missed something crucial about the good news. It isn't only about we offer to God...it is more importantly about what God offers us.

Look at the text from Isaiah. It may sound a little harsh at first (calling us grasshoppers and plants that wither and blow away.)⁵ But look where the text is going. The reason we need to remember how small and fragile our lives are compared to God is so that we can understand that God is not small and fragile. There is a power and a resource available to us from God if we are willing to "wait for the Lord" as the prophet puts it.⁶ When we offer ourselves as we are - even if what we offer is our bone crushing suffering, our complete exhaustion, our angry recriminations, as well as our brightest and best gifts - God does likewise and offers Her very self to us. What God offers is renewal and strength, endurance, comfort, inspiration, hope, grace, and forgiveness.

⁵ Isaiah 40.22-24

⁶ Isaiah 40.31

I have to tell you that this idea of offering ourselves as we are is not an easy one. It is hard for those of us who were raised to put our best foot forward, to lead by our strength, to hide weaknesses and to pretend you have no needs. (And I place myself within that group.) The demand we need to resist in order to find our call, for those of us raised in that school of thought, is to resist the temptation to pretend like you have it all together. At the congregational care gatherings, people mentioned how meaningful it has been for them to meet people who have struggled in similar ways. When we offer up the things we don't have all figured out or when we acknowledge the places where we are weak, we make it possible for people to connect with us who need to know that they are not alone. At end of the day, that's what Paul is getting at in the Corinthians passage we read today. He was connecting parts of himself with people where they are at... all for the sake of the gospel.

So as we come to the table our Lord today, I invite you to come as you are to "wait on the Lord" as Isaiah describes it. For those who do 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. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God!!!