

Renewed Strength

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

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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 sundown, 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.

In 2001 Irish-Norwegian composer Rolf Lovland composed an instrumental piece for his mother's funeral. He quickly found that there was something about the tune, the melody, that people were embracing beyond the gathering to honor the memory of someone beloved by them. Lovland later said, "there's something about the song people are embracing – which becomes emotionally strong...I believe people think of it as a song they use for their own stuff." With this recognition in mind, Lovland felt that his usually instrumental only compositions needed

lyrics in this particular case. He decided to meet with author and songwriter Brendan Graham to write lyrics. So quickly inspired by the music, Graham is said to have finished the song that very night with absolutely no rewrites needed. The lyrics, now familiar to all and beloved by many, are an affirmation of encouragement, gratitude and love.

When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary
When troubles come, and my heart burdened me
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence
Until you come and sit a while with me

Recorded now over 125 times worldwide, it is Josh Groban's version that many of us know best, and have felt empowered, healed and strengthened by.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders
You raise me up, to more than I can be

You raise me up. While Brendan Graham never has said who the 'You' who raises me up is intended to be, many people do connect You as God. It is God who raises me up, so I can stand on mountains, or walk on stormy seas. It is the Holy Spirit who is still here and waits with me in the silence. It is Jesus who raises me up to more than I can be.

It was Jesus more than 2000 years ago who raised up Simon Peter's mother-in-law from the bed where she lie sweating and ill with a fever. This was a serious matter in the ancient world. A fever was not only debilitating for a short while, but was often a symptom of a condition that would lead to death. Upon hearing of her illness, Jesus came to her bedside, took her by the hand and raised her up.

He raised her not only from the fever that broke immediately, but whatever other limits, symptoms and disease troubled and burdened her. He raised her up not only from what was most likely her deathbed but also right back fully to the life that she knew. He raised her to all that she could be.

Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them, and this unnamed woman returns to her role as a woman in the society of the time. She is the first person in Mark's gospel who exemplifies true discipleship, and the first of other women who will be described as having served Jesus. As this first person to show true discipleship, she has been raised to be more than she could have expected to be.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law remains unnamed, as does her illness, yet we still know so much of her impact on the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the impact a serious illness would have upon a household and a community. Illness carried a heavy social cost as not only would a person be unable to earn a living or contribute to the well-being of a household, but their ability to take their proper role in the community, to be honored as a valuable member of a household, town, or village, would be taken from them*. In that time and place it was her calling and her honor to show hospitality to guests in her home as that was her place in the world. Jesus raised

her up and restored her to her social world as he brought her back to a life of value by freeing her from that fever. She was raised and restored to her calling and her community.

Healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law, healing the many who crowded the doorway to her home, Jesus' ministry was to renew strength, to raise and restore those who were cut off from their calling and community.

For anyone who has experienced a serious, life-limiting, life challenging, illness, or an extended time of healing from an injury and has been restored to health we understand the joy of simply being back as a participant in the "ordinary" processes of community life. In our extended time of the Corona virus pandemic that has sickened 105 million people worldwide, and 77 million have recovered, so that they too understand the joy of simply being back as a participant in the "ordinary" processes of community life.

Yet we have only begun to calculate or comprehend the heavy social cost of the Corona virus, how the passing of loved ones alone in a hospital or nursing home complicates our grief, how the sheer magnitude of deaths globally that could not be properly mourned will continue to challenge us, how the isolation from family, friends and lifestyles will forever change us, how the necessary economic holds will be restored and renewed, how children's learning and social abilities will be able to be restored and renewed. We are slowly, gradually, being called back to our places in the community, to our roles, to our places in the world. Our hopes and our strengths are being renewed for these healings that will be raised up.

It is in this liminal time that we also have an awareness of the renewing of our social health strength as we have been reminded of both the precariousness and preciousness of human life, as well as the connected webs of community, the loving bonds of relationships, the ingenuity that has continued to keep us together while safely apart, the creative generosity of sharing and how our faith has deepened, strengthened, grown and expanded in the face of what is the harshest time most of us will experience in our lives.

We are reminded again and again of the wideness of God's mercy, that God does not faint or grow weary. We are reminded again and again that God's understanding is unsearchable as power is given to the faint, and the powerless are strengthened. It is God who raises us up with renewed strength so that we can stand on mountains, or walk on stormy seas through the upheavals caused by the many social challenges of the pandemic. It is the Holy Spirit who is still here and waits with us in the silence, who waits with us through the isolations and the separations from life as we know it and as our lives will become. It is Jesus who raises us up to be more than we can be as we claim and reclaim our callings and our places in the worldwide community. Amen.

*Sarah Heinrich, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-129-39-5>