

FEBRUARY 4, 2024
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE
EPIPHANY
"THE LIFTING"



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***CALL TO WORSHIP:**

To whom can we compare you, O Holy One?

We lift up our eyes,

We wait upon the Eternal our God.

How good it is to sing praises to our God.

A song of praise is fitting!

Let us worship God together.

—from Psalm 147: 1-11, 20c and Isaiah 40: 21-31

***INVOCATION:**

Everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth,
you who spread the heavens like a curtain, and
make us a tent to live in, gather us in the shelter of
your love, and renew our strength, that with wings
as eagles we might not grow weary as we walk with
you. We pray in the power of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

***INVITATION TO CONFESSION:**

Come away from your pretensions to examine your
relationship with God. Break away from your
illusions of independence to realize your
responsibility in the church. Claim your unity in
Christ with all God's children. Then realize how
much you need to confess brokenness and seek
healing.

***RESPONSIVE PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION
AND NEW LIFE:**

ONE: God invites us to come to worship as our

whole selves: God offers us a new beginning day by day and week by week. Trusting in God, we pray for transformation and new life:

ALL: Holy One, we hope in your steadfast love, bringing our broken hearts and our wounded spirits. Make us aware of the hearts we break, the spirits we wound, of those we treat as outcasts, of those we tread down. Renew us in your grace, renew us in your strength. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? God does not grow weary with us, but loves, forgives, and renews us. Go with renewed strength in your walk of faith. Praise the Lord! We are forgiven!

***GLORIA:**

**Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here.
One God always here.**

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Isaiah 40:21-31

²¹ Don't you know? Haven't you heard?
Wasn't it announced to you from the beginning?
Haven't you understood since the earth was founded?

²² God inhabits the earth's horizon—
its inhabitants are like locusts—

stretches out the skies like a curtain
and spreads it out like a tent for dwelling.

²³ God makes dignitaries useless
and the earth's judges into nothing.

²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely is their shoot rooted in the earth
when God breathes on them, and they dry up;
the windstorm carries them off like straw.

²⁵ So to whom will you compare me,
and who is my equal? says the holy one.

Power for the weary

²⁶ Look up at the sky and consider:

Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament"? ²⁸ Don't you know? Haven't you heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.
He doesn't grow tired or weary.

His understanding is beyond human reach,

²⁹ giving power to the tired
and reviving the exhausted.

³⁰ Youths will become tired and weary,
young men will certainly stumble;

³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength;

they will fly up on wings like eagles;
they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary.

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

¹⁶ If I preach the gospel, I have no reason to brag, since I'm obligated to do it. I'm in trouble if I don't preach the gospel. ¹⁷ If I do this voluntarily, I get rewarded for it. But if I'm forced to do it, then I've been charged with a responsibility. ¹⁸ What reward do I get? That when I preach, I offer the good news free of charge. That's why I don't use the rights to which I'm entitled through the gospel.

¹⁹ Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. ²⁰ I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like I'm under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law). ²¹ I act like I'm outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law (though I'm not outside the law of God but rather under the law of Christ). ²² I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. ²³ All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it.

***GOSPEL READING: Mark 1:29-39**

Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law

²⁹ After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. ³¹ He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

Jesus' ministry spreads

³² That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered near the door. ³⁴ He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

³⁵ Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. ³⁶ Simon and those with him tracked him down. ³⁷ When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!"

³⁸ He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." ³⁹ He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: “Authority” With thoughts from N.T. Wright

Not long ago there was a great disaster on a large lake, somewhere in Europe. A tourist boat, loaded with cars and holidaymakers, had failed to shut its doors properly; the water began to pour in; the boat began to sink, and panic set in. People were screaming as the happy, relaxed atmosphere of the ship turned in minutes into something worse than a horror movie.

All at once one man – not a member of the crew – took charge. In a clear voice he gave orders, telling people what to do. Relief mixed with the panic as people realized someone at least was in charge, and many managed to reach lifeboats they would otherwise have missed in the dark and the rush. The man himself made his way down to the people trapped in the hold. There he formed a human bridge: holding on with one hand to a ladder and with the other to part of the ship that was nearly submerged, he enabled still more to cross to safety. When the nightmare was over, the man himself was found to have drowned. He had literally given his life in using the authority he had assumed – the authority by which many had been saved.

Take that picture to a different coast, the sea of Galilee. A hundred yards inland, in the little village of Capernaum, into the synagogue. Here is a man, not one of the recognized teachers, who begins on

his own authority to tell people what God’s will is, how the kingdom is coming. The usual teachers – priests and scribes, the literate ones, with in some places Pharisees as well, the self-appointed scrupulous guardians of Jewish ancestral traditions – didn’t teach like that. They always said, “as Moses said”, or “as Rabbi so-and-so said.” Jesus spoke with a quiet but compelling authority all of his own.

And with the same authority he spoke words of healing. Sometimes people for whom life had become a total nightmare – whose personalities seemed taken over by alien powers – confronted Jesus; indeed, they seem to have had a kind of inside track on recognizing him, knowing who he was and what he’d come to do. He had come to stop the nightmare, to rescue people, both nations and individuals, from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So, whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them, all with the same gentle but deeply effected authority.

This is how the author of the Gospel of Mark begins to tell us both about how Jesus became so popular so quickly and of how the course of his public career pointed inevitably to its dramatic conclusion. There is no doubt that Jesus quickly attracted huge crowds, and that his authoritative healings were the main reason. (*Before Jesus, there*

had been many so-called healers, but none with the success that Jesus had.) The healings in itself would have been threatening to those who thought they were in control; priests, scribes, pharisees, etc. However, as they will soon discover, there is more to this man from Nazareth.

Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil and destruction, forces that, like the dark, cruel water pouring on top of frightened and helpless travelers in that tourist boat. Jesus came to be the human bridge across which people could climb to safety. And if, in the process, he himself paid with his own life the price of this saving authority that Jesus possessed, a human bridge with outstretched arms carrying people from death to life, that was simply part of the truthfulness of his action. The demons had their final shriek at him as he hung on the cross, challenging and mocking for the last time the validity of his authority. On the cross Jesus completed the healing work he began that day in the synagogue.

Can today's church learn again how to speak and act with the same authority? If so, we will find both the saving power of God unleashed once more and a similar heightened opposition from the forces of darkness. Similar, but not the same. The demons knew Jesus and knew he had come to defeat them on and for all. They can still shriek, but since Calvary they no longer have authority.

To believe this authority from the cross is the key to Christian testimony and saving action in the world that, despite the world's frequent panic and despair. True authority has already been claimed by the loving authority of God in Jesus.

Have you seen it? Have you felt it? Have you invited it into your life? Who is truly the authority over your life? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, your children are gathered here together this morning to sing praises to you and give thanks for your love and blessings. We feel your presence with us as we bring our joys and sorrows to you. Embrace and help any of your children who are troubled today. Lighten the darkness of those in grief. Send them comforters in their loneliness.

Give courage to try again to those who have lost jobs or squandered their money, those who have experienced the failure of friendship or of love, and keep them from all bitterness.

Show your kindness to those who face shame and disgrace, who have made mistakes for which they had had to pay bitterly, and help them to use the future to atone for the past.

Guide those for whom this is a crucial time; those who are beginning new studies or new jobs, those who for the first time have to leave home to work in another place, those who are beginning the

retirement phase of their lives and leaving behind familiar patterns of work, those who have become engaged or who are about to be married, those who cannot determine whether they should marry, those who are awaiting the birth of their first child and the first responsibilities of parenting.

You are always with us through all these changes and seasons of our lives and we are very grateful.

Please continue to be with all our loved ones and all those who are ill or suffering and all those on our prayer list.

We pray all these things in the name of your son, Jesus, who taught us to pray . . .

THE LORD’S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

HOLY COMMUNION

***INVITATION:** We come to the table not just as individuals but as a community. By sharing the loaf and the cup, Christ makes us one with him and with each other.

***THE GREAT THANKSGIVING**

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

It is right for us to give thanks and praise.

With joy we praise you, gracious Father, for you have created heaven and earth, made us in your image, and kept covenant with us—even when we fell into sin.

We give you thanks for Jesus Christ, our Lord, who came as the light of the world to show us your way of truth in parables and miracles.

Therefore we join our voices with all the saints and angels and the whole creation to proclaim the glory of your name.

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Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty.

The whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest.

We give thanks to God the Father that our Savior, Jesus Christ, before he suffered, gave us this memorial of his sacrifice, until he comes again. At his last supper, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it [*here the minister breaks the bread*] and said, “This is my

body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup after supper [*here the minister pours the wine*] and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me.” For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Therefore, we proclaim our faith as signed and sealed in this sacrament:

People: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Lord, our God, send your Holy Spirit so that this bread and cup may be for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we and all your saints be united with Christ and remain faithful in hope and love. Gather your whole church, O Lord, into the glory of your kingdom.

SHARING THE ELEMENTS

Take, eat! Remember and believe that the body of Christ is the bread of heaven for us.

Take, drink! Remember and believe that the blood of Christ is the cup of our salvation.

***UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with

spiritual food in the sacrament of his body and blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

May Holy One, Creator of the End of the earth, Lift up your spirit, bind up your soul, and renew your strength. Go with hope in the steadfast love of God. Amen!