

**“Lifted Up by God”**  
**The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany - Feb 7, 2021 - Mark 1:29-39/B**

*Grace and peace to you from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Our newest Council members have just completed an online questionnaire of their organizational strengths using the ***Living Your Strengths*** inventory. We do this every year to better understand how the new staff and Council members’ individual strengths fit in with the existing leadership as a whole. We do this because Church leadership is unlike any experience they may bring from the business world to the Council table. Each has discovered their top five strengths - they may be maximizers, or activators, learners or communicators, or have gifts of inclusion or strategy to bring to the group. And of all the possible strengths we possess, one that I look for each year is called “Woo.” Unfortunately, for a number of years recently, our leadership had been deficient in “Woo.”

Now, for those of you thinking ahead to Valentine’s Day, “Woo” is not the romancing, or “wooing” of another person. It does define woo as possessing the *gift of hospitality*, as seeing what people need and providing it; the predisposition to invite and include, to assist and support and to serve others, while finding personal joy in fulfilling that role. Well, I am delighted to report that we now have a generous helping of “Woo” on our Council, and it will serve us well as we keep moving through this pandemic to an eventual vision that will have us hosting and serving folks who have not yet become part of our community of faith. It will be very important for us to get up and out, and to share the faith that is in us in such a way that the Holy Spirit will reach out and capture hearts for God through who we are and how we reflect our relationship with God in everything we say and do.

We have a great example of that strength (or gift) in today’s Gospel story, where we meet, however briefly, the unnamed Queen of Woo – otherwise described as Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. Like many women in scripture, she is not named, so I like to think of her as ***“Alma,”*** a name which means “nourishment,” someone who “feeds one’s soul” or “lifts the spirit.” Today we meet “Alma,” and by doing so, we find out that Peter has a mother-in-law – which lets us know that he was married. Since his wife does not appear, we wonder if perhaps he has been widowed, but it doesn’t say. It does say that she is living in the house, but the Bible doesn’t explain why.

Regardless, Alma’s calling, her household role as (presumably) the eldest female, was to host, to serve guests. On this particular day, she was unable to do so, as she was confined to bed with a fever, (which was a more dire situation at that time than it is today). Now, I don’t believe Peter and Andrew sent Jesus to go see her because they were incapable of laying out the snacks and making folks welcome in the house; no, they were concerned about her, and what could have been a serious illness-unto-death. But once Jesus took her hand and lifted her up – she was fever-free and well enough to take charge of the household duties required of the host.

It should strike us as odd that this woman — whose life was just in jeopardy — immediately begins to serve the men. Why wouldn’t they tend to her? But the Greek verb used by the gospel writer of Mark says that Jesus quite literally “raised her up.” It is the same word Mark uses later on to describe Christ’s resurrection, as well as to describe certain of Jesus’ healings. In all those circumstances, the person is restored to their

community or to their closest relationships. When someone is brought low by unclean spirits, illness, or death itself, Mark says Jesus raises them again to fulfill their valued role in the community.

Peter's mother-in-law was up and around after lying on her bed burning up with fever. She was not just "better" or "well," she was fully restored! And she meant to make the best of her relationship with Peter's new best friend, Jesus. Her serving was her witness – and I would bet it was an even better evangelism strategy than going out and knocking on doors! I wonder, once she heard the voice of Jesus, did she become the voice of God in Capernaum? Apparently, the news immediately spread like wildfire throughout the whole town, but because the townsfolk were good and faithful Jews, they waited until the sun set on the sabbath day. Then, people started bringing their sick relatives and the ones possessed with demons down the narrow streets of Capernaum right to the doorstep of the house, where Jesus tended to a great number of them all throughout the evening. Again, he silenced the demons, not allowing them to speak, because **they knew who he was**. This is a hallmark of Mark's storytelling – that Jesus' identity was to be kept a secret until, in God's time, it would be revealed that he is the promised Messiah.

Please note, that at no time does Jesus make a big fuss or spend a lot of time on convincing people to do or be something they are not. He simply invites them: Come and See. Follow Me. Get up and Walk. Go and Tell. And just as clearly as our nostrils can identify the smell of baking bread, Jesus' voice is heard by hungry hearts. Simply. As an invitation.

Perhaps you're sitting out there thinking to yourself right now, "*Well, I've never heard God actually speak to me before.*" Wrong. People, you just recently heard the God who gives life to the dead say to you, "*Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*" You've heard him teach in the synagogue with authority and you are - at this very moment - hearing him as he proclaims the message that says, "*for this is what I came out to do.*" What you hear when the Bible is read, is the present-tense Word of God. Because the Bible is not simply a record of what God has said. It is **the means by which** God says it. To you.

Here's the thing. You don't have to search out God - not in nature, not in your head, and not in your heart. You don't have to search out God anywhere else, but in his Word. If you want to speak to God, *pray*. If you want to hear God speak to you, *listen to the Gospel*. And when God speaks to you, you get up and serve...in the way that nourishes your soul and restores you to the joy of fulfilling your gifts within a loving community.

Remember, Jesus' first four disciples were fishermen, who knew very well that some days you catch a bunch of fish, and some days you don't. That when you pull in the nets, some get away or never get caught in the first place. And if you ask one who fishes why they do it, most would say it's about the fishing itself, not about catching everyone or anyone in particular. It's about extending an invitation to something which is life-giving, nourishing, and filling for both the fish and the fisher – the opportunity to experience a deeper relationship of God's love with others.

It is clear in today's story that some were called to follow and fish; while others were invited to stay and serve. Peter, Andrew, James and John had been called to follow. "Alma" was lifted up to serve. Serving. It's how Jesus will describe his own ministry and the disciples' calling as well. And while this woman – a simple mother-in-law - literally served food to her guests, in a broader sense she, too, was one of the first disciples of Christ,

fulfilling her role in her family and community – hospitality and serving – for the good of the fish and the joy of the fisher within the waters of her world.

Hear again from the prophet Isaiah: *“Have you not known? Have you not heard? ...the LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth...but those who wait on 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.”*

This familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah inspired the beloved hymn, *“On Eagles’ Wings”* which we will sing in a few moments. It reminds us that God is God and we are not, but that God is always raising us up and giving us strength. And once we have heard the voice of God, we will know what God is asking. Kindness. Mercy. Justice. After all, *“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”* When God speaks to you, when God lifts you up, you get up and serve. Amen.

Susan Langhauser  
Advent Lutheran Church  
Olathe, KS

**Resources:** Jason Michelli for **Day1** (1.20.21); **ELCA Faith Lens** 1.19.21); Ginger Gaines-Cirelli for **Day 1** (2.7.21); *“Dissonance and Resolve,”* Chris Litman-Koon for **ELCA Faith Lens** (2.7.21); Steven Charleston 2.5.21.