

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on February 4, 2024.**

PROCLAMATION

<Isaiah 40:21-32; Psalm 147:1-11; Mark 1:29-39>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I had been in Southeast Alaska for nearly ten months by the time my parents were able to come up and visit. By then it was early summer, which is the best time to visit the Southeast, as it's referred to by locals, because the sun is actually out. And given the size of the state - largest in the United States (sorry, Texas) - there is a variety of climates across the state. For example, while we often think of tundra and igloos when we think of Alaska, the Southeast is actually a temperate rainforest. Again, the largest in North America. As such, the region sees over three hundred days of cloud cover and rain. If you're going to visit the region, go in the summer. Which is precisely what my parents did.

While there, they were astounded at all the wildlife that was ubiquitously present. As I was driving them around Juneau, my dad remarked from the backseat, "The scenery and the wildlife viewing is just astounding; I'm glad you're driving, because I would have drifted off the road several times by now because I wasn't paying attention!" Of particular note were all the eagles. Eagles in trees. Eagles sitting on fence posts. Eagles majestically in flight.

Now, I don't know how many occasions you've had to observe eagles, but they are not ones to fly by excessive flapping of wings; their flight is occasioned more by spreading their wings and gliding on updrafts and air currents than it is by exerting energy to keep themselves airborne. They are supported and conveyed, not so much by their own effort, but by the presence and capacity of the wind which is, quite literally, beneath their wings. And this is, I believe, of imminent importance to how we live out our faith and discipleship in the face of what can so easily be placed upon us in terms of expectation, either self-imposed or culturally indicated.

Because the call of faith, which we have been discussing these past weeks, and the tasks of ministry can indeed seem overwhelming and demanding in today's day and age, notably when it comes to the potentially dreaded "E" word: evangelism.

And I shouldn't speak for anyone other than myself in this regard, but perhaps your mind is already conjuring images of standing on street corners with signs or calling out to passers-by. Or maybe you're thinking instead of striking up conversations with random strangers in the check-out line. Or perhaps your mind is even thinking of dropping everything, selling everything, and traveling to a foreign country in a mission endeavor.

I daresay that in today's day and age, in our current culture, it can be imposing to consider sharing our faith and telling another person, or group of people, about our own testimony.

Some sense of this, even, could be gleaned from Mark's gospel. And I love Mark's gospel for its direct nature and straightforward approach. Being the earliest gospel recorded, it was designed more as a record from those first-generation, eye-witness followers to the next

generation as they came into the faith. But this format, especially, Mark's repeated use of the word "immediately" throughout, gives us a sense of a frenetic, high-energy pace to the way we live out our faith. And any mechanic will tell you that it's detrimental to run an engine at high capacity for too extended a time. This is true for humans, as well. But Mark's gospel sets a tone of fast pace, high energy immediacy. And I want us to be aware of this as we move through this year focusing on and studying Mark, primarily.

In the immediately previous verses Jesus is being baptized, and then immediately driven into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan and then attended to by angels. And then, without pause or transition, the first disciples are called and Jesus gives his first proclamation in the synagogue, which leads directly into our reading this morning. Immediately, as they go to Simon and Andrew's house, Jesus is confronted by the sickness of their mother-in-law. Remember, now, especially given how much is happening in so short a time, that it is still the sabbath and, according to Jewish law, there are certain expectations and allowances for what can or can't happen on the sabbath. Because two things, in short order, are about to happen in one brief verse which break the understood Sabbath law: Simon's mother-in-law is healed of her sickness, and then she begins to serve Jesus and the others, engaging in the work of hospitality. Preparing food and drink. Making ready the table. Seeing to their needs.

Both of these events fall into the understood category of work. And a third, passive event, is evidenced in the following verse: all the town has heard of the healing and they bring other sick and possessed to Jesus for healing. Granted, their travel to Jesus is after the Sabbath has concluded, but Mark would have us understand that the news of the healing work of Jesus has already spread throughout, prior to the end of the Sabbath.

And if all of this weren't enough, after an all-too-short break, Jesus and the disciples gather themselves up and move into the greater region of Galilee to heal and proclaim good news, for as Jesus says, "for that is what I came to do."

I don't know about you, but I'm tired just thinking about all that has transpired in such a short period of time, and in such a short reading. And that's only been a few minutes of worship this morning, to say nothing of all the rest of our daily, faithful living and discipleship. If this is to be the case, if this is to be the pace, I don't know that any of us would last long in such a ministry.

But, remember the eagle.

In balance to the frantic pacing of Mark's gospel and Jesus' ministry, the eagle - and our reading from Isaiah - has two key lessons to offer us in regards to the life of faith, of discipleship, and of proclaiming good news.

The first lesson is to relax and live naturally, without undue strain. I'm reminded of that old joke about the man who went to the doctor and said, "Doc, my elbow hurts when I move it like this." To which the doctor casually responds, "Then don't move it like that."

Remember, the eagle flies primarily by stretching out its wings and gliding, naturally, on updrafts and wind currents. Similarly, the life of faith with all it includes - even the proclamation of good news for the hope and salvation of all the world - should rarely, if ever, feel like work. We are each given unique gifts, talents, experiences and perspectives so that we may each, in our own way, live out the calling God has given us in Christ. It can be tricky

to find the right groove for you, it may take some experimentation to come to it, not only individually but for congregations as well, but it will come to you, to us. In many ways it already has. It is meant to be natural. Much as I imagine an eagle feels joy at gliding over the air currents, so too will we feel joy when we live out our faith and proclaim good news in the way we are called to do so.

And the second lesson is just as, if not more important: the air on which the eagle glides is not one that is artificially created but rather is reflective of the natural order of creation. In our lives of faith, this is the reminder that we do not do this of our own accord or by our own means, but rather we rely on and trust the movement of the Spirit of God to direct and guide us.

In the Hebrew language, a word often has multiple meanings. English likes to assign one meaning or translation to a word, but in Hebrew multiple meanings are often applicable at the same time. And this is such an occasion. The Hebrew word for wind, *ru'ach*, can also be translated as breath, most often used in conjunction with The Divine breath, as well as Spirit, specifically the Spirit of God.

In Isaiah, as the prophet purports to the people that, in the life of faith, we shall mount up with wings like eagles the implication is that we shall be raised up on the Spirit of God. Our works, our living, our calling is one which is engendered and supported in the presence and Spirit of God, and not of our own design alone.

In the living of our faith, we should be engaged, which is good - to be active and involved. But we can get caught into the feeling that we must do it all, all the time, and that it relies on us, all the time. This includes the proclamation of good news - telling people of what we have experienced & known. In a counterbalance to this we are reminded that it does not always rely on us, and that even when it does, we are guided and led by the Spirit of God.

Where, then, does the Spirit lead us? Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law occurred on Sabbath, not during an acceptable or convenient time. She then worked around the house to serve them on the Sabbath. Even though cultural expectations and understandings were being broken, the Spirit was leading Jesus, leading Simon's mother-in-law, leading others toward healing and the fullness of life.

My dad's comment on that afternoon in the car driving through the sunshine and Alaskan air, has become a reminder to me that it does not rely on me. By that time I had grown so accustomed to seeing eagles everywhere that I was no longer aware of them; they were commonplace. His reaction, and the reminder that has come with it, is to be mindful of the Spirit all around us, leading us and sustaining us in faith. The *ru'ach* of God is so ever-present that we can easily overlook it. But to do so would undermine the ministry and mission to which we are called. To do so would make it feel like work, and work that drains us, leaving us empty. Rather, we are to be filled with life, and in such life, proclaim life, healing, wholeness and hope for the world. May we, as well, mount up on eagles' wings and be renewed in the calling of our faith. Amen.