



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Called to Sustain

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Epiphanies illuminate our lives with startling clarity. They prompt arouse questions about how to move forward in light of our new awareness.

In this Epiphany season we are asking ourselves individually and as a church four questions. These were inspired by my time in consulting with organizations and I hope foster conversations and dreams.

In prior Sunday services we considered...

- What is God calling us to do? Our faith stories confirm time and again God calls us to trust.
- How will God's call be unique among all the things we do? Like Jonah, when we let God's will be done through us, grace and transformation take hold. This call is unique because God is unique.
- How do we steward our resources? When look with Jesus' eyes, we see that we have all we need to bring out the best in others and ourselves.

The final question: is this call sustainable? Can we do this day after day after day?

The common lectionary provides answers with the psalmist pointing us to God's omnipotent reach in naming the stars and next the Gospel of Mark's story of Jesus getting up close and personal.

As a review, Mark tells us with only "follow me" four fishermen drop their nets. Along with Jesus they astound everyone in a synagogue. Before I read

where they go after that morning's coffee hour, please pray with me.

God of grand design and quotidian moments, settle us now, silence in us any voice but your voice. Let your spirit swirl through these ancient words to startle us with your presence and our purpose. May we feel your intimacy in each breath and bravely follow your son, our savior. Amen.

Mark 1:29-39

Immediately 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 Jesus 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 Jesus 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,

Jesus 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."

Jesus 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.

*This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.*

Several weeks ago, Amanda Gorman stole the show at the presidential inauguration. This 22-year-old National Youth Poet Laureate pierced the unspoken tension, fearful something awful would happen, with her youthful message of hope and a call to action.

She is about the only one who could upstage Lady Gaga's outfit and performance of our national anthem.

Spoiler alert, you don't need to read between the lines of this sermon to know I am a fan of Lady Gaga.

Her voice melds with Tony Bennet's.

She won acclaim for acting in *A Star Is Born*.

Three years ago at the Super Bowl she rocked the halftime show and stepped out of character briefly to say “hi” to her mom and dad.

This 34 year old consistently presses forward to reimagine herself in ways that inspires.

Task & Purpose, a news outlet dedicated to journalism for and about active-duty military, published an article this week of Lady Gaga as seen through eyes of Marine Corp Captain Evan Campbell.

After several tours of duty in Iraq and Syria, Campbell now serves at the Marine Barracks in Washington, DC and just happened to be the height and stature needed that day to accompany her.

In case you missed it, Lady Gaga’s couture of brilliant blue bodice and billowing red skirt that trailed behind her caught everyone’s attention and could have easily caught her foot – so Campbell’s presence gave her stability to descend the stairs.

This big guy also escorted former presidents and Supreme Court Justices that morning.

Campbell describes meeting Lady Gaga fifteen minutes before their scheduled entrance and thought she looked quite nervous.

This is a diva who has performed since she was a teenager and in front of tens of thousands of fans throughout the globe.

Campbell remembers, “It just seemed like a very natural human thing to do, to look over and go, ‘Hey you’re going to do great. You always do well, you know, you’re a performer, you’re going to do great.’”

Campbell said. “It just seemed like she needed to hear a relaxed voice.”

They talked a little longer and Gaga told him this would be “the most important day of her life, singing the national anthem.” He described her as “incredibly genuine,” and said she joked at one point that they had an equal chance of tripping over her dress.

Then, Lady Gaga asked if he would pray with her.¹

Even the most accomplished, well-rehearsed, and richly talented among us can feel vulnerable at times.

In that instance of vulnerability, Campbell gave her the two things needed most – his arm to lift her and prayers to calm her.

In today’s scripture readings, the Psalmist praises God’s celestial authority to name the stars and orchestrate the movement of heavenly bodies.

And the Gospel of Mark focuses on God entering ordinary, human life, through Jesus.

¹ Haley Britzky, “We spoke with the Marine from this viral Inauguration Day photo with Lady Gaga,” *Task and Purpose*, February 3, 2021, https://taskandpurpose.com/entertainment/marine-lady-gaga-photo-inauguration-day/?fbclid=IwAR3GplMHTFCW3mRv9nZwGZP7_TgeDF5rul9skAoV064BEWrGK6LqscwmRyw

With the typical urgency expressed in Mark, once he enters Simon's home and learns of his mother-in-law's illness, Jesus goes to her, touches her, and "lifts her up."

No poetry or adjectives. Terse nouns and verbs. Yet, in Mark's inimitable brevity, Jesus' personal encounter foreshadows his mission for all time.

The Greek verb, "to raise up," describes more than a physical movement from prone to upright. The word Mark chose implies new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may again rise up to take their place in the world.

This is the same verb Mark reserved for Jesus at his resurrection. "He has been raised." (Mark 16:6).

Jesus "lifted her up" and with one word she turns and models the appropriate response to such grace: she served.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law "served" immediately after her encounter with Jesus.

In first-century Palestine, this woman's illness isolated her from family and community and herself. Her acts of caring connected her with the human family and forms her sense of self-worth.

In the ancient world, hospitality was highly prized as an art. To possess the capacity to care for others honors them and oneself. Such hospitality braves intimate connection that promotes human dignity.

Jesus describes the essence of his own ministry as “to serve” rather than “to be served.”

Mark’s simple word choice discloses so much more.

This verb, *diakoneo*, describes her serving and echoes the act of the angels who tended Jesus after his forty days in the wilderness.

It is also “to serve” that characterizes his disciples and inspired the call to ministry heard by those in our midst ordained as deacons.

If you take this small nugget of healing story, and turn it as a crystal, the healing illuminates God’s power to raise us from illness and death. And the woman’s desire and capacity to serve, restores her life, the household, and community with human dignity.

This brief glimpse into Jesus’ earthly ministry brings the cosmic God into human life and is salvation writ large.

All of this is made possible by the intimate touch of Jesus at a time when this woman and the entire household that depended upon her were most fragile.

Theologian Kristine Culp claims that such vulnerability is the pivot of salvation...the point at which we may receive and bear the glory of God.

Culp defines vulnerability as susceptibility to being changed, for good or for ill, as an enduring feature of creaturely existence.

She writes, persons and communities remain vulnerable: they are always prone to harm and therefore almost inevitably marked by suffering and wrong sometimes by unfathomable tragedy or brutality and yet they are always also inclined to transformation.

Those liminal moments, teetering between power or weakness, health or sickness, rich or poor, hopeful or despairing, life or death, become the situations in which we question our earthly existence. At those moments, when we get to the point that our efforts or reason cannot make us whole, we welcome the divine.

We pivot to change and move in a new direction toward God and salvation or we perish.

Vulnerability is not an appealing concept, given the high value we place on self-sufficiency and independence. Who wants to be vulnerable?

But the realities of our present moment heighten our widespread sense of vulnerability and teach us that stand-alone self-sufficiency is an illusion.

Moments of vulnerability help us recognize the deep interdependency we have with one another and with God.²

Hence Jesus rushes. Jesus heals. Jesus saves.

² I am indebted to Roger Gench's weekly email from The Presbyterian Outlook who reminded me of Professor Kulp's book. While I was a student at The University of Chicago, she was in final stages of writing this text and frequently led discussions with students. Kristine Kulp, *Vulnerability and Glory*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 2010), 2.

Through Jesus, God sustains our lives and through our lives, we sustain Jesus' ministry. Without our willingness to acknowledge our frailty we might miss the eternal.

In God's perfect orchestration, our human frailty brings us to Jesus, who raises us and then sends us out to be his servants to the world, with healing rippling forward.

In the telling words of Teresa of Avila,
Christ has...
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world..³

God desires intimacy in our lives. That's why we gather to worship, to hear one another's voice, to feel the spirit move among us.

Many of you have called or written to ask about in-person worship. I hear you. We hear you. You want to be near one another in worship. And we also want to protect in this vulnerable pandemic.

At the session meeting next week, please know your elders will prayerfully discuss when and how.

In the meantime, I ask you to bring your frustrations and anger at this pandemic, I ask you to bring your hurts and fears, and name all the forces that alienate you from those you love. Pour all of this out before God.

³ In the public domain. The complete verse may be found here: Teresa of Avila, "Christ Has No Body," *Journey with Jesus*, https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml

Then, come Christ's table and the tables in your homes to be filled with his healing presence.

By tasting common elements, symbolizing his body and his blood, given for our lives, we become intimate with him. If we are willing to be so vulnerable with him, he promises to raise us and sustain us.

Whether you are like Lady Gaga, the woman with a fever, or any tender soul seeking to be healed, Jesus meets us through the church. At the most vulnerable times of our lives, Jesus needs us to risk intimacy, to touch and care, to pray and to hope.



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