***Proclaiming the Message***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**February 8, 2015**

**OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Isaiah 40:27-31

Today’s Old Testament Witness from the Prophet Isaiah includes these familiar verses:

 *Those who rely 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.*

**THE WITNESS OF ST PAUL** I Corinthians 9:16-23

Here St Paul is telling, and you could even say that he is boasting, of his adaptability in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. St Paul claims that he is so adaptable that he becomes “all things to all people.”

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 1:29-39

The events described take place shortly after Jesus calls his first four disciples: Simon and Andrew, James and John.

**SERMON**

These ten verses of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark pack a lot of action into a single paragraph: Jesus cures the mother-in-law of his new disciple, Simon, of a fever. The woman, who is nameless, feels so thankful that she rises from her bed to serve Jesus and the disciples. And the grateful mother-in-law doesn’t serve them tea and cookies.

The Greek word for “serve” that is used in the original gospel text is *diaknonein*, which means “to minister unto.” This is the same verb that describes the angels ministering to Jesus after his forty days and nights of trial in the wilderness.

Simon’s mother-in-law takes care of Jesus, as Jesus took care of her, with tenderness and love. As a matter of fact, the name of *deacon* for those church members charged with the spiritual wellbeing of our West Center Church people and program, comes from this same word, *diakonein*, “to minister unto.”

Jesus cures Simon’s mother-in-law, and she ministers unto Jesus behind closed doors because it is the Sabbath, and according to the Law, no work is to be done on the Sabbath, which is set apart solely for the worship of God.

But the word of Jesus and his miraculous power has traveled, and by evening, at the end of the Sabbath, masses of people are waiting for Jesus to heal them. (You can get an idea of the mob scene by looking at the cover of today’s bulletin. The people are so crowded together you can hardly count them.)

Jesus is not one to turn away the needy, and so he works throughout much of the night. But in the early morning, while it is still very dark, Jesus leaves the house alone and goes to pray at a deserted place.

After searching for Jesus, Simon and his companions find him, and urge Jesus to go back to the city where everyone is looking for him.

But instead of going back to the city for more of the same, more of the same endless clamor for healing, Jesus answers Simon: “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 Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Jesus is making an interesting and important distinction here about his ministry. Although Jesus has special gifts of healing, great compassion, and abiding sympathy for those afflicted by illness and disease, Jesus has not come to earth to heal bodies.

Jesus has a different mission from God. Jesus has come to proclaim a unique and healing message, to proclaim the gospel, to proclaim the good news of God’s eternal, forgiving love for us.

Jesus travels throughout Galilee preaching, and his message continues to this day: The Kingdom of God is at hand, and we can enter it, we can enter the eternal love of God, if we repent and believe the Good News of God’s love.

Crowds continue to follow Jesus --- to hear his message and to be healed of their separation from God. Many may hope to have their physical illnesses healed too.

But in addition to Jesus taking care of the multitudes, throughout the Gospels you always see Jesus taking care of himself, as we all need to take care of ourselves.

Whenever Jesus gets a chance, he takes care of himself by going off alone to pray, to catch his breath, and to refocus himself on what he is really about: bringing people to God.

This is a lesson that St. Paul could have learned from Jesus. In the First Corinthians reading for today, St. Paul becomes all things to all people: to the Jews, he spoke of his Jewish roots; to those under the law, he became as one under the law (although he himself was not under the law). To those outside the law he became as one outside the law (even though he was under Christ’s law). To the weak, he became weak, (although he was not weak), so that he might win the weak.

So rather than being like St Paul, and trying to be all things to all people, which, after all, is impossible anyway, it is far better for us to be like our Lord, remembering and being who we are, and in that way letting our lives speak, as we invite people into the Kingdom of God by our words and by our example.

But how can we do this, remember and be who we are? Once again, we look to our Lord.

When circumstances seem to overwhelm us, when people or life is pressing against us, wearing us down or pulling us in different directions, let us be like Jesus. Le us go off somewhere, where it is quiet, where we can be alone and pray. In prayer and meditation and contemplation, we can remember our core, who we are and what we are about. We can regroup and gain strength for the morrow and the days after tomorrow and tomorrow.

The Holy Season of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday on February 18th, calls us to introspection and renewal. Throughout the forty days of Lent, I will have some ideas for us to guide our thoughts and actions. Through prayer, gratitude and openness, may we find the truth that we are seeking, the truth that will set us free.

And the best part of our Lenten seeking is that we are not alone. When we go off alone to pray, we are not really alone. God is there, listening to us and encouraging us --- God as the creator of all, God as our Lord and God as the Holy Spirit, which takes whatever form we can imagine, from elephant to dragonfly.

Quoting from this morning’s Old Testament Witness from the prophet Isaiah:

 *Have you not known? Have you not heard? … Those who rely 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 not faint.*

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

Our Hymn of Response, *On Eagle’s Wings*, sets Isaiah’s words to music in a most beautiful and encouraging way.

Listen to the hymn’s refrain:

 *And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand.*

West Center Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

101 Pondfield Road West, Bronxville, NY 10708

914-337-3829 westcenterucc@verizon.net

www.westcenterchurch.org