

Reflection for 31 January 2021— Living Echoes of God’s Toneⁱ
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Isaiah 40:28-31; Mark 1: 21-39
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At the end of a busy and emotional few weeks, the words from Isaiah move me this week:

²⁹ God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for 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.

If “even youths will faint and be weary, and the young ...fall exhausted,” how much more so we folks well on our way to approaching or past our “best before” dates?

Some of you keep a smile on my face with some of the “aging” jokes you share. One said, “Don’t worry about getting older. You’re still going to do dumb stuff, only slower.” Isn’t that the truth?

But the last verse of that passage in Isaiah offers hope: ³¹[that] those who wait for 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.

Today’s gospel tells of just such an older person whose strength was renewed when Jesus arrived at Peter and Andrew’s house, perhaps in flu season. Hearing that Peter’s mother-in-law was sick, Jesus went to offer her a helping hand.

Some of you have experienced that, when someone from church or the neighbourhood shows up at your door with food or phones to ask how you are doing. More of the latter is happening during the pandemic, of course. They are being disciples of Jesus, doing the kind of caring ministry he did.

There is a joke about this story, that Jesus just healed the sick mother-in-law because he and the fellows with him were hungry. Because the next line says she got up and served the bunch of guys who had just made themselves at home in her house.

There are two other things I want you to note in the story. One is that Jesus and his friends had just come from the synagogue. Sometimes we forget that Jesus was a good Jew and had spiritual disciplines that sustained him. One was regular worship with his faith community, which strengthened him for his work. The other was his personal prayer life.

Because his life was so full, so busy, he got up extra early—while it was still dark—to begin his day with prayer. **Some** of you may do that, but I find it an extremely difficult spiritual practice. Many of you know by now that I stay up very late; I come from a

family of night owls and worked night shift at a medical centre for years when my children were small. I set my alarm for the latest possible time to allow me to get myself ready to get where I have to be. I can only *imagine* getting up while it is still dark, to pray. I am sometimes still up then. For me, it's bedtime prayers.

With Lent coming soon, though, I may feel inspired to try it the way Jesus did it. They say if you can do something for six weeks, it is possible to form a new habit. Fifty years versus six weeks. We'll see.

Any time, not just during Lent, can be a time to intentionally practice spiritual disciplines to deepen our relationship with God and each other.

The first spiritual practice that today's gospel mentions is what we are doing right now. Worshipping together as a faith community. It is part of our life, our work together, as Jesus-followers. It sets the stage for the more active parts of our life and work together.

The two go hand in hand and that is why we in the United Church like to say "Worship and Work are one." What starts in worship prepares us for our work as a community of faith. And the worship part not only prepares us, but is actually also part of our work.

Liturgy—the Order of Worship, including the prayers, the readings, the songs—is a Greek word meaning "Work of the People." Liturgy. Work of the people. It is central and formative to who we are together and what we are able to accomplish together.

When we chat together, catching up on news after worship, we are continuing our Liturgy, our worship. It's not separate, it's part of an integrated whole. When we eat together in "normal" non-pandemic times, the same is true. And the same goes for all the meetings to conduct the business of the church. They are part of the "liturgy," the work of the people. We often light a candle to remind ourselves of God's presence with us and we frequently pray before, during, and/or after meetings. Some of us are praying silently the whole time, that what we say is in line with God's hopes for us and will be heard that way.

Sometimes, we are so caught up in getting on with our work, that we skip the worship time, the prayer time, which could help us do our best work. It happened to Jesus, too, through interruptions from others. He did the intentional set-up: got up early, took off his watch and went off by himself without the cell phone. Well, you get the point. He did not tell his friends where he was going. Nevertheless, the disciples searched until they found his secret prayer spot and told him that people were already looking for him.

The verb used by the gospel writer Mark was "hunt." The disciples hunted for him. That gives me a creepy feeling, putting me in mind of the movie series called The Hunger Games, where young people drew lots and the losers became the game being hunted for entertainment. I was so haunted by those movies.

In this case, Jesus was the one being hunted, because people wanted what he was able to do for them. So, yeah, he was being stalked. He couldn't even pray in peace.

What's sad about it is that Jesus KNEW he needed that prayer time, that quiet time with God. Deeply spiritual people get that. He was in prayer to “wait for God” and “renew his strength” so he would be able to “mount up with wings like eagles” for the day ahead, as described in the Isaiah passage.

Someone else who did that was the 16th century German reformer Martin Luther, who supposedly said something about all his work taking much longer if he didn't take the time to begin his day with prayer. The English translation of his reputed quote is “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”ⁱⁱ I haven't found an authentic source in his writings, but it is part of the lore that gets included in discussions of Luther's theology of prayer.

I think it is significant that, though Jesus needed his quiet time alone, when he “went to work,” so to speak, Jesus went to where the people were, met them where they were. And he was able to do that because he was one of them. In that way, he fit the description of the prophet who was to come after Moses, which Morgan will read to us in our first scripture reading on Sunday morning.

In this reading, there is a promise to the people of Israel of a new prophet like Moses, with a command to receive him and pay attention to him. Some think it is the promise of a succession of prophets, which Israel would have for many years. While the priests and Levites—their ordinary ministers—taught God's law to the Israelites and carried out priestly functions, prophets were their *extraordinary* ministers. Maybe they had interim ministry training. Prophets would hold up a mirror for people to see their faults, remind them of what they were to be about, and help them think about their future. Prophets were known for warning about judgements to come, consequences for not following God's way; they also were comforters, giving hope when hope was needed.

In the Deuteronomy passage, God tells Moses that the new prophet will be a part of the community, someone raised up from their midst. Likely the reason this is a reading in the season of Epiphany, a season in which stories about Jesus point to his identity and mission, is that—among other things—Jesus is a prophet, a prophet like Moses. Some people, reading backward, therefore see this reading in Deuteronomy foretelling the coming of Jesus. Who is Jesus? He is a prophet like Moses, raised from within the faith community.

The gospel writer Mark mentions the authority with which Jesus teaches, not like the scribes. His prophetic role is to share the good news that God's kin-dom was already in their midst and they had only to embrace it and live in it, loving God with their whole hearts and loving their neighbours and themselves in the same way.

How is one to do that? Take care of the vulnerable, seek peace, love justice, care for the earth and care for each other. It's a very familiar message—preached by all the great prophets down through the ages.

Jesus is not the only prophet, nor the last. Prophets listen for God's Word and speak on behalf of those whose voices are drowned out. Do you know a prophet? Is your call to discipleship to speak God's truth and good news today?

God, speak to us that we might speak and lead as living echoes of Your love.

ⁱ Line in *Voices United* #589, "Lord Speak to Me," words by Frances Ridley Havergal. First hymn in worship on 31 January 2021.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35269-i-have-so-much-to-do-that-i-shall-spend> accessed on 29 January 2021. An interesting article on Luther's Theology of Prayer is Julian Freeman's "Martin Luther on Prayer" at <http://julianfreeman.ca/articles/martin-luther-prayer> accessed on 29 January 2021.