

## Sermon 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany Year B February 5 2012

The readings today tell us something about the nature of God. Both the Old Testament reading and the gospel of Mark present us with images that remind us that “God’s ways are not our ways.” Both readings teach us that what we want or what we would do stand in contrast to how God does things.

There is an old joke that goes something like this. An elderly man who was quite ill said to his wife, “You know Sarah; you’ve always been with me—through good and bad.

Like the time I lost my job—you were right there beside me. And when the war came and I enlisted—you became a nurse so that you could be with me. Then I was wounded—you were there, Sarah, right by my side. Then the Depression hit and we had nothing—but you were with me.

And now here I am, sick as a dog, and as always you’re right beside me. You know something Sarah, you’re bad luck.

There’s something in each of us that wants to blame somebody for all the things that go wrong in our lives or when things don’t go as we had hoped; and more often than not, the people we choose to blame are the very people we once looked to as an answer to all our problems.

In the first reading from Isaiah we see the Jewish people who had been very successful finding themselves in exile in Babylon. The author of Isaiah is writing to a group of people who are depressed. They’ve lost their lands and their homes. They’ve been taken away from their families. Life did not turn out for them like they thought it would. They are in exile, nothing is familiar.

So what does Isaiah say. He talks about how omnipotent and powerful God is. The writer tells the people of Israel they cannot begin to know the mind of God—that God’s ways are not their ways. He says God “brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing...”

In Mark’s gospel we continue the story of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. He’s a local man who is making a name for himself. Today we find in Capernaum and he’s in the process of casting out demons and healing people. He is very busy. He has his disciples around him and their ministry is really taking off. Jesus is becoming very popular and the people are putting their trust in him.

The disciples who agreed to follow Jesus are probably feeling pretty good. Their leader is showing his power by casting out demons and healing. They are starting to put down some roots and drawing a following. In short, they are feeling successful. Business is booming and everything is going right.

Yet in the midst of all this success Jesus does something that in human terms seems very strange. He takes off to a deserted place. The disciples go looking for him. What does Jesus do? He tells them “We’re moving on, we’re done here.

This must have sounded strange to the disciples. Things were just getting off the ground and there was plenty of work to do. Jesus says, “Pack up we’re moving on. This doesn’t make sense to our human way of thinking.

What person do you know that starts up an enterprise, gets it going strong, is having success and decides to simply pick up and move the business?

Our ways tell us that we should strive for success, "bigger is better." Most of us wouldn't move on, rather we'd build on our successes and make it more successful.

So what are these readings asking us to look at? What are we supposed to learn from these passages? Why are we presented with this strong image of God given to a people who were depressed, downtrodden, defeated, exiled to a foreign land? Why does Jesus simply pick up and move without finishing the work that he could have done in Capernaum?

Both readings remind us that God's ways are simply not our ways.

I can imagine the Jews in Babylon asking themselves, "If God loves us and is so powerful, why did he take everything away from us and allow us to be taken away to a foreign land? If we are truly God's people how could he let us lose our homes, families and be taken prisoner?"

In the gospel the disciples were probably asking, "Why on earth does Jesus want to leave now? We're just getting going. There are lots of people left to heal. How can he just ignore them? I was just getting used to living in Capernaum."

Where are we going next? This seems like a bad move. If he keeps moving like this, how are we ever going to build an organization and really make a difference?

I think each of us ask these same kinds of questions from time to time. "Why did God let me get old and have all these health problems? Why did God let me lose my job? Why am I left feeling so depressed? Why did God let these things happen to me? After all I'm a good person."

In the middle of his busy time in Capernaum, Jesus went off to a deserted place by himself. He took time to be alone with God to wrestle with what to do next. I can imagine Jesus asking similar questions, "God, why is there all this suffering in the world? How can I cure everybody, heal everybody, relieve all the suffering in the world, if I can't even take care of all the problems in this one small town of Capernaum."

Like God who spoke to the Jews in exile in Babylon, I can imagine God saying to Jesus, "My ways are not your ways." My ways are not the ways of the world. You cannot heal everybody. You cannot save all the world's problems. So it is time to move on and let the people solve some of their own problems. It's OK to let go and move on."

IN the same way I believe God speaks to us, if we listen. I believe God says to us, "Your ways are not my ways. You cannot solve all the world's problems. Some parts of life are simply difficult. That's the nature of life. I cannot promise you that life will not be hard. I cannot promise you that you will not feel defeated, or angry, or hurt, or frustrated, or alone at times."

But I can promise you that I will walk with you. I will be nearer to you than you dare to imagine. I am literally in every breath you take. The pain you feel...I feel too. You are not alone.

God does not promise that the road will be easy, instead Go sent us his Son. Jesus suffered and died to let us know that God understands our suffering and our pain and promises to walk with us each and every day. God's ways are

not our ways. It is up to us however, to let God in...to let God walk with us in the midst of our pain, our doubts and fears, our depression and loneliness. He offers to be with us in the deserted places of our lives.

May we find the courage to allow him to walk with us as we face the joys and sorrows of our lives, so that we might transform ourselves, and in doing so be a source of light and strength for one another. Amen.