

**“When It All Seems More Than You Can Handle”**

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

*Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39*

Our first passage for this morning is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Scholars believe this portion of Isaiah was addressed to the Israelites in exile in Babylon, after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. They were dislocated, they'd begun to grow discouraged, and they had come to doubt God's care for them. The prophet speaks a word of hope, centered in God's power to strengthen the powerless and hope to those who are in despair. Listen now for God's word to you.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?  
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;  
who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

*To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.  
Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?  
He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;  
because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,  
not one is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
'My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God?'  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary,*

*and the young will fall exhausted;  
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.*

Our second passage is from the first chapter of Mark's gospel. As it begins, Jesus is fresh off of casting out a demon in the synagogue in Capernaum. We don't tend to speak of demons in anything but a metaphorical sense anymore—and I think that's basically a good thing. We speak of demon rum, wrestling with our own private demons, but those are metaphors. However we understand demons and the demonic, I have come to believe that the power of Jesus—of love embodied within and beyond a community—can help dispel that which is destructive of life, health, and hope in individuals and communities. Notice how busy Jesus is in this passage. Try to imagine yourself in the scene—put yourself in Jesus shoes.

*As soon as 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 him 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 sunset, they brought to him 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, he 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.' He 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.*

If there is one religious cliché I have grown tired of hearing over the years, it is the old chestnut "God won't give you anything more than you can handle."

I apologize if that's a favorite saying of yours, but I've come to have real problems with it. It's a little too simple. First of all, I've known too many people who have been pushed to and beyond their limit of endurance by circumstances in their life. It happens.

I suppose I can hold on to the cliché by saying "God won't give you anything more than you can handle, but life might."

Leaving aside the question of how much power that takes away from God, it is true that life can throw an awful lot at a person or a family. We have too many examples of that in our own congregation. Look at your own life and the lives of people you know and tell me there weren't times when it seemed like some catastrophe, some accident, some untimely death of a spouse, parent, or child, some late night phone call bringing unwanted news, some meeting with the boss didn't feel like way too much to handle.

In many of those situations, thank God, we can point to how a community rallied around a sick or injured individual, an anxious, grieving family. Many of us have our own personal stories of finding strength in private prayer and the support of family, friends, and the church. We do have those stories. But there are times when it feels like it is all too much.

Isaiah was speaking to a people who definitely felt like they had been given more than they could handle when he reminded the overwhelmed and despairing Israelites that God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless and he called on them to wait for the Lord and thus renew their strength.

Maybe it is true, after all, that God won't give us anything more than we can handle. But we have to add a little caveat, tack on a little phrase at the end: "with God's help."

With God's help we remember that it's not all on our shoulders to bear.  
With God's help we remember that we can only do so much, individually or as a community.  
With God's help we remember that we can ask for assistance from others.  
With God's help we remember that we ourselves don't have to be God.  
We are just agents of God's work, of compassion and love in the world.  
We don't have to be God—together and individually we do God's work.  
But we don't have to be God. God's got that under control

There's another reason I have a problem with the saying "God won't give us anything more than we can handle."

It goes back to something former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt said. Our President quoted it this week in his remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast. He commented that he is often reminded of something Mrs. Roosevelt was fond of saying,

"Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength."<sup>1</sup>  
Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength.

President Obama said, "I've wondered at times if maybe God was answering that prayer a little too literally." He went on, "But no matter the challenge, He has been there for all of us. He's certainly strengthened me "with the power through his Spirit," as I've sought His guidance not just in my own life but in the life of our nation." That's what Obama said.

What if God sometimes gives us tasks that are too hard for us —too hard for us on our own , that is —so that we are driven to God for strength?

I know, I know. That raises questions about why bad things happen to good people—and God's role in all of that. But what if it's not so much about God causing the event as it is about God giving us the task of responding to it with love, grace, compassion and reliance upon the Spirit?

What if God really does expect big things from us? Things that we just can't accomplish without prayer and commitment and reliance upon God and one another?

Which brings us to our text from Mark's gospel. There is Jesus, fresh on the heels of facing down something demonic in a fellow child of God. Note the pacing of the text, the emphasis on activity.

As soon as they left the synagogue (As soon as is just another way to render one of Mark's favorite words Euthus--Immediately!) As soon as they left the synagogue, they went to the home of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother in law was sick in bed with a fever. They told him about her at

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day* (newspaper column), March 6, 1940.

once (there's immediately again!). Jesus lifted her up and she began to serve them. (She's working, too. I want to say to Mark, come on, give the woman a break. She's just had a fever. She gets up and serves them. Talk about activity.)

Then when evening came, they started bringing all sorts of needy people to Jesus—those plagued by destructive thoughts and patterns, those wracked with disease—and they just kept coming like a horde of autograph seekers to a famous ballplayer. Mark says, literally, "*The whole city was gathered around the door.*" But they were looking for more than a signed program. They were looking to be delivered from what ailed them.

Let me ask you. Have you ever felt like needs were crowding around you, like there was always one more thing to get to, one more kid to get to soccer practice, one more detail to take care of on your job, one more person in your life to see about.

Some of you are in the sandwich generation. You are sandwiched between teen and young adult children who need your help getting launched and aging parents who need care. Have you not ever felt like a whole city was crowded around your door?

There's a sculpture over there, made out of wood. Scott Fisher brought it back from Africa. It's from an African tribe, the Makande tribe. If you could see it up close, you'd see that there are children grabbing onto the legs and body of the man in the sculpture. And on three sides, there are demonic faces. He's under pressure. Do you know something of what it's like to be the man in that sculpture?

You know that Jesus had to be exhausted that night. I don't know whether he was an introvert or an extrovert, but eventually even extroverts get enough of people.

So in the morning, while it was still very dark (and if that sentence construction sounds a little familiar to you—In the morning while it was still very dark—it's how the Gospel of John starts the account of Mary Magdalene going to the tomb on Easter morning.)

While it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went off by himself to pray.

"O Lord," Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength."

What happened in that time of prayer?

Well, theologically speaking, if you are a Trinitarian and have a high view of Jesus, God was having a conversation within Godself. Jesus was having some community time in God. There is community within the God head, Father Son and Holy Spirit, and if your view of Jesus is a little less exalted, He was spending time with the divine essence, with the God he called Father, to be recharged, to be reminded—reminded of who He was and what He was sent to do.

A colleague of mine, Martha Spong, a U.C.C. pastor, wrote this prayer for pastors. But I think it's really good for any of us. I want to share it with you. It's her personal prayer to God.

*Holy One,*

*Some weeks are long-listed.  
I type into the Notes app,  
available across devices.  
I like to write it all down,  
then backspace over  
the finished tasks.  
The blank box is my reward.*

*Some people  
do it differently,  
writing a list on paper,  
the back of an envelope,  
or a page in a spiral notebook,  
or the front sheet of a legal pad,  
drawing lines through the words  
to mark tasks completed.*

*I hope you are interested,  
O God,  
because so many of the things  
on my list  
are directly related  
to working for you.*

*I study and plan and write.  
I shop and set up  
and host and teach.  
I organize my thoughts  
trying to serve you better.*

*I don't suppose a to do list  
is a prayer, but if  
I were to pray it,  
I would pray that you  
be in and around and between  
all the lines of my life,  
the characters I type  
and the characters I meet,  
the words I write  
and the words I speak.*

*Maybe all my to do lists  
need to start this way:  
For God's sake, this week  
I need to ...*

*In the list-making  
and the backspacing  
and the lining through,  
be with us, Lord.  
Amen.<sup>2</sup>*

For God's sake, this week I need to.... What if all of our lists, whether we are ordained pastors or elders or not, what if all of our lists had somewhere on them, "For God's sake this I need to..."? It would help us to remember who are and what we are to be about. Who we are is people in community.

Yesterday morning I went over to Oak Crest School to lead a prayer for Bensten Schone before the big prayer walk. I don't know, Bill? How many people were there—several hundred?—holding up signs, adorned with stickers. #pray4bman.

The kids in the nursery school, every one of them, decorated sheets with the letter B on them. There were a host of B's on a string hung across the area behind the microphone stand. It was amazing.

Then everybody headed off to walk.

I thought on my way home, "This is part of what prayer is about, too. Because sometimes, sometimes, we're under so much pressure, so much duress, that we can't pray for ourselves, and we need people to pray for us."

There is a whole community, a whole world, of people praying for a 6 year old boy. Because for God's sake, and that little boy's sake, they needed to. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> This prayer was passed on to me by another colleague, who found it on the *Reflectionary* website. The author of the prayer is Martha Spong. You can find it here:  
<http://marthaspong.com/2015/02/08/the-to-do-list-a-prayer-for-pastors/>