

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on February 8, 2015)

Theme: ***Balancing the Call***

Text: **Isaiah 40:21-31** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Did you not know?

Have you not heard?

Was it not told to you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

Yahweh sits above the vaulted roof of the world, and its inhabitants look like grasshoppers! God stretched out the skies like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent for mortals to live under!

God reduces the privileged to nothing and throws the rulers of the earth into chaos.

No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root on earth, than God blows on them and they wither, and a storm wind sweeps them away like chaff.

"To whom can you liken me? Who is my equal?" says the holy One.

Lift up your eyes and ask yourself who made these stars, if not the One who drills them like an army; calling each by name? Because God is so great in strength, so mighty in power, not a single one is missing.

How can you say, tribe of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, "My destiny is hidden from Yahweh, my rights are ignored by my God?"

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. This God does not faint or grow weary; with a depth of understanding that is unsearchable.

God gives strength to the weary, and empowers the powerless.

Young women may grow tired and weary, young men may stumble and fall, but those who wait for Yahweh find a renewed power: they soar on eagles' wings, they run and don't get weary, they walk and never tire.

Text: **Mark 1:29-39** (*The Message*)

Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew's house, accompanied by James and John. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn't let them say a word.

While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, "Everybody's looking for you."

Jesus said, "Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come." He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

Balancing the Call

I love how our Hebrew passage starts out today: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" I'm surprised *The Message* doesn't have Isaiah adding one more

phrase such as , “like DUH!” How many times do you have to be told that God is in charge? How many times do you have to realize that you’re basically an insect crawling around in God’s big terrarium? How many times do you have to go through something in your life to understand that God will never grow weary or tired? How many challenges and conflicts will you encounter until you realize that God will always pick you up, will always be renewing your strength, will walk with you along every journey whether you’re on crutches, stretched out on a hospital bed or running the race of your life?

“God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds,” the Psalmist proclaims in our Psalm for today, #147. “God lifts up the downtrodden; God casts the wicked to the ground... God takes pleasure in those who hope in God’s steadfast love!”

One of the things I’ve come to realize as your minister is that one of my primary purposes is to constantly remind all of us from where our help comes and to encourage you as I encourage myself to look to God for the answers to our lives and to trust God to strengthen us and carry us through each and every moment of our lives whether we “feel” like God is there or not.

For it is only in trusting God and finding our hope in God that we can rise up with wings like eagles and run and not be weary. Without God, we’re basically crawling along on our bellies or stopping with every step to catch our breath and find the will to go on.

This kind of trust is part of what Dr. Bruce Epperly calls “embracing God’s energy of Love.” “...In the case of Isaiah,” he writes, “the infinity of God is a source of confidence and hope. The God of the universe directs the galaxies and also inspires our own lives. God gives humankind strength, energy, and wisdom. In today’s parlance, we are connected to the energy of the big bang; God’s lively energy flows in and through us, providing us with all the resources we need to faithfully flourish in our time and place.”

Which brings us to the crux of our theme today which I’ve called, “Balancing the Call.” Within this big banging energy filled universe, it is so easy to get wiped off our feet and filled with ideas and ways we think we can make a difference in the world and in the lives of others, and indeed we can. But unless we remember our true source, and return to our source regularly and often, the Call we have received to serve in whatever capacity, is in danger of being lost and our covenant broken if we don’t find a way to balance that which we are called to DO with who we are called to BE. For we can only BE when we are connected to the one true source within whom we live, move and have our being. Without this connect the balance is off and the teeter-totter tends to totter more than teeter until we hit the ground with a loud hard thud and that glorious call is thrown off the other end and may even be hard to find. How’s THAT for stretching a metaphor?!

“The contrast between divine infinity and human finitude enables us to take our tasks seriously, but not too seriously,” Dr. Epperly writes. “Our work is important, but not all important. We leave our mark, are remembered by God, and shape the future, but we gain solace by being partners with the cosmic God who sustains and guides us. We can work hard, knowing that we are part of a much larger story. Much depends on our agency, but not everything. God is the beginning and end of all things; therefore we can work hard and also rest in God’s abiding care.”

I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about this balance between working hard and resting in God’s care. I think many of us would say we weren’t brought up with this kind of balancing idea. I remember hearing about the need to rest and relax and, of course, the whole idea of “taking off” on the Sabbath, just like God did. But the reality was quite different. “Taking off” seemed to mean you just did your work from home instead of from the office.

In today's Gospel story from Mark – we're still in chapter one by the way, and we're four weeks and counting in exploring it – we see Jesus besieged by the whole city lining up at Simon and Andrew's door to receive healing for their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Word has gotten around, obviously, that Jesus has truly stepped into and up to his Call and is even taking time to heal people's mothers-in-law. Now that's somebody you can believe in!

And you can just imagine that this is exhausting work. It's like not only having the paparazzi constantly trying to take your picture, but they also want everything you have to give from the deepest part of yourself as well. Whew! I had to contemplate this week what it must have been for Jesus to have the constant press of people, many or even most of whom were obviously sick and/or mentally deranged pressing on him in constant and, most likely, loud urgency to free them from their diseased state. What did it take out of him in terms of human energy to let the Spirit of God flow through him and touch all of those tormented souls and did they ever go home or did they just camp outside the door waiting for another glimpse or another touch?

I wonder if he had to rise very quietly and ever-so-softly step over any number of people as he made his way through the dark before dawn to find his way to a secluded spot to pray. We know it was most intentional to get away from everybody to do this, because when Simon and the others go looking for him they let him know that "everybody" was looking for him.

Jesus knew about balance in a way that I think escapes so many of us in this modern, always connected, incredibly noisy, 24-7 world in which we find ourselves. Jesus knew that to be able to continue His call and keep preaching, teaching and healing, he would have to regularly find a way to connect to His source – His Creator – His Abba. And every time we see him finding a place to pray or rowing away in a boat we know that He is showing us how vital it is to remember why we're here and who it is that's helping us to fly like an eagle and walk and not get weary.

"Do we have the right to work ourselves half to death if we want to" asks Donna Sinclair in her beautiful devotional booklet, "A Woman's Book of Days." "I don't know," she admits. "I do know that some- times we are visionaries. We see a task to be done that has shape and form, and meaning above all. A task that will make things better in the world, the only meaning there is. And when we are obedient to that vision, it costs us. Perhaps the answer lies in allowing ourselves to see the whole vision: generous family time, artful work, rest that must only be undertaken only by ourselves (could you ask someone else to rest for you?), deliberate time spent with the Spirit of the holy in all things, through prayer or meditation, all in graceful proportion. We must be true to the entire vision of our lives, not just a piece of it."

Being true to the entire vision of our lives is a lofty goal indeed, in all senses of that word. For it's only from being aloft, getting a bird's eye view (an eagle's eye, perhaps) on the whole of our lives that we can find ways to balance our lives and know that we're filling up the pitcher as much as we're pouring it out.

I know there have been times in my own life where I've poured out the whole pitcher and then melted down the pitcher and poured that out, too, until there was absolutely nothing left; and so my back "broke" or some other illness or calamity came along to MAKE me stop and, hopefully, realize how completely out of balance my life had become. And step-by-step, I realized again and again how I was called to plug into my source and go within to find the strength and the power I needed to continue with my call.

(sung): Revive us again; Fill each heart with Thy love;
May each soul be rekindled with fire from above.

"[This] old revival hymn... calls forth the reviving presence of God to rekindle the embers of our souls, so that we might be empowered to live our lives fully before God and in the world," Rev. Robert Cornwall wrote this week on his lectionary blog, "Ponderings on a Faith Journey." "It is a fact that life, especially the life of faith can be thrilling, but also draining. We cannot hope to be effective servants of God dependent upon our own strength. When the embers are close to going out, we pray that God would rekindle them. Indeed, we see in Jesus an example of one who gave his all, and found it necessary to turn to God in moments of quiet to receive again the empowering presence of the Spirit."

God calls each of us to our own path of ministry. In the United Church of Christ we believe in the Priesthood of All Believers. Each one of us in this room is a minister, each of us is called to serve in our own way with the gifts given to us. How we sustain our calls is up to us. There is a constant source, a flowing stream, a river of life just waiting for us to connect, drink deeply and wade right in that we might be refreshed, renewed and revived, ready to continue on the path paved for us with love.

Amen.