

Epiphany 5B February 8, 2009

Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

*The Fever Breaks* by Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

The preparations had gone on all day.

The house was clean, again, after a busy week.

Not that the week was so different from any other week, except that this week, Simon had quit his work as a fisherman along with his brother Andrew.

This made her nervous.

She spoke with Simon's wife, who was her daughter, about it and her daughter said,

*I don't know, Mother, what we are going to do, but he seems quite taken with this Jesus everyone is talking about.*

*If Jesus is who everyone says he is, then I am not worried.*

*If he is not, I am very worried.*

Of course, that was only a couple days ago and men often get ideas in their heads before they come to their senses again. Maybe Simon was just tired of fishing and needed a break.

But it was Sabbath this night and the house was clean,

the food was cooked and

the whole neighborhood smelled of unleavened bread, baking foods.

She loved the holy silence that fell about the neighborhood as the sun set on Sabbath Eve.

Soon the sun would set, the men would return from synagogue and

the celebration of Adonai's great work would begin again.

She loved this time, just before everything started for the evening meal and just after everything was prepared for the day.

Just as the week was different though, today was different as well.

She wasn't feeling well. Something was different.

She couldn't place it exactly, but it had to do with something she had been thinking about over the past few days.

It had only been a few months since her husband had died at sea, a fisherman like Simon and Andrew. Her daughter brought her to live with Simon and the family after her father died.

She missed her husband and it was made all the worse by never having the possibility of seeing his body.  
Somewhere on the deep sea floor were his bones,  
returning not to dust  
but to silt and murk and salt.

A month or so after her husband died,  
she asked for the rabbi to come by so that she might speak with him.  
He arrived the next afternoon,  
a nervous man with eyes buried under thick eyebrows,  
a slouching gait as if he were looking for something on the ground.  
He spoke fast and seemed to be searching for compassion rather than inhabiting that quality of character.

*Rabbi, she said, I am grateful for your visit. Can you tell me why Hashem took my husband?*

*He was a gentle and loving man.*

*He read Scripture to me every night and we talked long into the evening about all things holy.*

*Why would He take him from me?*

Tears rolled down her cheeks but her voice was steady, inner strength built up over the years of struggle and imperial rule.

The rabbi's eyes darted from the ground, to her, to the sky.

He was silent for a time, then he said,

*We ask "why" all the time, do we not?*

*Do you feel that Hashem is hidden from you now?*

She looked to the ground and whispered,

*Yes, rabbi. I sometimes wonder whether there is even a God who cares for us.*

*Yes, well...do be careful, woman. Blasphemy lurks behind our doubts. However, Hashem knows this question.*

*Do you remember your Prophets, the great Isaiah?*

*He answers your doubts:*

<sup>21</sup> Have ye not known?  
have ye not heard?

hath it not been told you from the beginning?  
have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth?

<sup>22</sup> *It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth,  
and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers;  
that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain,  
and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in:*

<sup>23</sup> *That bringeth the princes to nothing;  
he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.*

<sup>24</sup> *Yea, they shall not be planted;  
yea, they shall not be sown:  
yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth:  
and he shall also blow upon them,  
and they shall wither,  
and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble.*

*He is indeed watching over us,  
even as trouble befalls us, child.*

*And remember the promise in those same words:*

<sup>31</sup> *But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings as eagles;  
they shall run, and not be weary;  
and they shall walk, and not faint. (Is 40)*

In the days and months that followed, she had begun to doubt.

*Wait on the Lord*

Well, she had been waiting a long, long time. She was indeed weary. To the bone. The emotional toll of losing her husband, living with her daughter and Simon, especially now that he quit his job to follow the next great Messiah.

Another miracle-worker or another revolutionary.

How will we eat?

How can anyone feed a family following prophets and revolutionaries?

*Simon will be lucky to not get killed in the next month, she thought to herself.*

She had begun to have moments where the whole world swirled in front of her eyes,

her whole body buzzing and a ringing in the ears,  
all of which required her to sit down or

grab something stable so she did not pass out.

Now, on Sabbath Eve she just didn't feel right.  
Her skin was dry and her breath felt hot in her nostrils.  
Her daughter had mentioned she looked pale and unwell that morning.  
As the sun moved across the sky toward the Sabbath sundown, she felt worse.

The doubts she had entertained over the past couple of months rushed back and forth in her head. She began to think that maybe she should just leave her daughter's house in the middle of the night.  
She was in the way.  
She was a drain on the family resources.  
Of course, maybe Simon should leave since from here, from this moment, he was the future cause of their misery.

What would he do, illiterate, swearing, nominal Jew that he was anyway?  
The man didn't even fish well.  
Torn nets, small catches and yet, he seemed to have friends and they seemed to have some affection for him.  
Maybe they just tolerated him.

*What am I doing with my life?*,  
she thought as the sun just touched the mountains to the east, casting long shadows over the land.  
What had the Rabbi said about doubt,  
or maybe it was about something else-  
what was it?  
Doubt breeds more doubt?  
That was true.  
If Hashem cared about her, cared about anyone, why didn't she feel Him?  
Why didn't anything in her life impress her with the imprint of the Lord's presence?  
From here, the world looked dark.  
Even in the brightest sunlight, it was as if meaning had been drained from the world.  
She missed her husband.  
She missed going down to the sea to wait for him in the evening, walking home together, the reek of fish pouring off him.  
She had learned to love that smell.

Because she loved him and he loved her.

A heavy sigh moved through her as her daughter came up to her, carrying the last of the linens for the table setting. She rested her hand on the back of her mother's neck.

*Mother, you are on fire. You are sick with fever.*

*Daughter, you do not see me, but the accursed Job before you. 'Days of affliction come to meet me and I go about in a sunless gloom.*

*My skin turns black and my bones burn with heat.*

*Mostly, daughter, like Job, I wait. And I am tired of waiting. I don't even know what I wait for anymore.'* (Job 30:27;30)

*You are delirious, Mother. You are not well. You must go to bed.*

Her daughter was worried. Her mother's eyes had sunk into her head and had dark circles around them. The fever burned hot and she had not felt one quite like that before.

Simon's wife laid out the linens and straightened the candles.

In the months that her mother had lived with them, her mother had never missed a Sabbath meal.

The setting sun burned red through the windows of the little house.

Simon came through the door.

His eyes were bright and dancing. It was as if his whole soul was on fire.

He was breathing heavily as if he had run home from synagogue.

He started speaking,

*You should have seen him, Wife!*

*He was teaching the scribes and...*

His wife put her hand up to stop him.

He saw the sharp concern in her eyes and stopped talking.

*What is it?*

*My mother. She is burning with fever. She is in bed. She has been quoting Job and has been troubled all day. It is as if the person she was is no longer looking out of*

*her eyes.*

Simon looked up the stairs and was disturbed. He knew that his mother-in-law had deep thoughts swirling in her mind after the death of her husband.

He also knew that she had spoken with a rabbi a few months ago.

That rabbi, Simon knew him.

Simon had his doubts about that man, but he wondered if the doubts in the man had turned into deeper, more spiritual doubts for his mother-in-law.

Jesus entered the house followed by Andrew, James and John. Simon immediately told Jesus about his mother-in-law's fever. Jesus listened closely and it was as if he heard everything else, too.

Simon had mentioned only the fever,

but he had the sense that Jesus heard the whole story underneath what he said.

Jesus went upstairs and sat next to Simon's mother-in-law.

He stared into her face and she looked back at him.

*Are you an angel?, she asked. Oh, no-I know you.*

*You are the one that has taken Simon from his job.*

*The next great Messiah everyone is talking about.*

*I am not an angel, Jesus said.*

He reached out to her and took her hand.

*Well, she said, I have waited this long for Hashem. I can wait longer.*

She held his gaze and remembered her husband.

Something flowed into her through his hand and at the same time, something flowed out of her.

All the heat of the fever seemed to slide out of her body and coolness flowed into her.

She felt young and awake. What was it that rabbi had said?

*He gives power to the faint?*

It was as if this Jesus person was giving her strength.

She felt Jesus pulling her hand.

He stood and put his hand behind her back and lifted her to her feet.

His hand felt huge on her back,

like a wing of a great bird lifting her into the air.  
She felt light, as if something had broken free from inside her soul, some anchor or weight.  
She looked into Jesus' eyes.

*Have faith in God, child,* (Mk 11:21) he said.

And she did.

She searched her being and could barely remember what her doubts and worries had been.

She came downstairs with Jesus and everyone was just sitting down to the Sabbath table. Jesus sat next to her as she took her place at the head of the table. Her daughter lit the candles and they covered their eyes.

Simon's mother-in-law began the Sabbath prayer,  
*Baruck atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shell Shabbat.*

Tears came down her face.

When the prayers were done, she looked up at Jesus.

He was gazing upon her as if she were a very young child.

She remembered how her father had loved her,

how her husband had loved her.

She felt held, as if by her mother,

long since gone from this world.

She stood and, with her daughter, served Jesus and Simon and the others who had come with them this Sabbath night. At one point, she thought to herself,  
*This must be what the angels feel like, serving Adonai in Heaven.*

She realized in a flash, as she poured soup into Jesus' bowl,

that her healing was only a doorway into this experience,

this serving in love and trust,

serving the One who taught the love of God to everyone.

Fever, demons, leprosy, whatever it was really didn't matter.

All of them were merely obstacles to the presence of love she felt and knew in and from Jesus.

Soon after the meal, people began showing up at the house. They had heard about Jesus at the synagogue and the authority he seemed to radiate. Apparently, there had been a man healed of demons by Jesus there.

It had been Jesus' first healing.  
She had been his second healing.

Simon's mother-in-law waited by the door and held it open. People streamed into the house.

Some were clearly ill, helped in by family members.

Some looked around nervously, as if someone or something else inhabited their soul - demons, perhaps.

Others were just there to watch.

She watched Jesus lay his hands upon the people in Simon's house. She gave water and food to those who wished it and felt a love she had never felt before for all of them.

Sometimes, Jesus would lean over and whisper into the ear of the person he was healing. He seemed to only do this with the ones who were nervous and troubled.

The next morning, the Sabbath day, Jesus was gone.

The men of the house awoke and were alarmed that Jesus wasn't there.

People hovered around the house outside, waiting to have an audience with the new healer in town.

By the time the sun came up, a whole crowd was pressing into the door.

Simon said,

*We have to hunt Jesus down. These people all want him. Everyone is looking for him.*

His mother-in-law said, *You should leave him alone. He is probably praying somewhere after all the work he did last night. Besides it is Sabbath you should honor it for the day of rest it is meant to be, for yourselves and for Jesus.*

Simon stared at her, then stood up and said,

*Men, let's find Jesus.*

Later that morning, the people still stood outside Simon's house. Jesus had not returned, and nor had Simon, Andrew, James and John.

Simon's mother-in-law opened the doors and fed the people.

The sick,

the demon-possessed,

the hungry,  
the watchers and the seekers, one and all.  
Her daughter helped, sometimes with a gasp of exasperation.

*Where is Jesus?* she said.

*Those who wait on the Lord will be strengthened,* her mother said.  
*Besides, knowing Jesus is present somewhere is healing enough.*  
*Even so, whether these people want healing or want teaching, they all need to be served just as the Lord serves us all.*  
*Do it for the sake of the Good News this Jesus brings.*  
*We are sharing in the blessings of His Good News.*

Her daughter nodded,  
took a deep breath and  
smiled at the leper who had just walked through their door.

Amen.