

1.16.2022, Epiphany 2

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Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Take Refuge in Him”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Where do you go for refuge and renewal of your physical, mental and spiritual strength? Though these three aspects of our health require very different kinds of attention, is there something that helps you keep these three in healthy balance? Today’s theme, “*Take refuge in him,*” reminds us that a life with God at the center strengthens our lives in every dimension.

Today’s psalm praises God, encouraging all people to faith saying, “*All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*” The Psalmist encourages humanity to take refuge in God’s steadfast love, the fountain of life. Finding refuge in God is always accompanied by God’s life-giving fountain renewing every part of our being, giving us strength to live for others.

Paul also suggests a life centered in God as the beginning of a faith journey leading to spiritual gifts, empowering our lives, church and relationships. God is the fountain that renews us with faith and knowledge, wisdom and discernment, healing and miracles, prophecy and interpretation. Paul lets us know we are given this long list of gifts “*as the Spirit chooses*” for “*the common good*” of all. The key to physical, mental and spiritual strength comes by taking refuge in God’s transforming power. This is what makes the church in general, and St. Mark’s in particular, such a tremendous resource for our lives. A congregation is made up of many people with many gifts, each activated by the Holy Spirit for the common good of all.

As I think about all of our congregation’s ministries I am amazed at the “gifts of the Spirit” with which this church overflows: ministries of music and worship, compassion and care, education and growth for all ages, stewardship of financial gifts, and the management of physical resources in our buildings and grounds. All of you participate in making the mission of this congregation happen with the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts happen when we take refuge in God, the fountain of life.

The marvelous thing about all gifts of the Spirit is that they are given to the church at every level: local, synodical, national and global. If you think you are too small or weak to make a difference, think again! God’s gifts become exponentially stronger and more effective as they are added together for the common good of all. God’s mission of steadfast love to the entire world is not only about “us.” Mission is so much more than simply the local work of single congregations. For example, when we send our gifts to the synod we support synodical, national and global ministries

of the ELCA so that the words of Psalm 36 and the prophet Isaiah might become a reality: that “*all people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings,*” that “*the nations shall see your vindication.*” If you think you are too small or weak to make a difference, lift up your eyes to the hills and see how God is alive through the diversity and power of many small local churches *that together become* a global force for good in the world. We are given gifts not simply for ourselves, but that *through us* all people might take refuge in God’s grace and love!

The gifts of the Spirit are given for the common good of the church and the world. The gifts of the Spirit transform us into *God’s people*, no longer Jew or Greek, but *God’s people*, working together with the church of all nations in God’s mission to transform this world. God’s mission is always aimed at something larger than simply ourselves and our local ministries. We are constantly encouraged by the Spirit to look outward and upward so that all nations and peoples might “*see your vindication and all kings your glory.*” The gifts of the Spirit, which we share in our annual gifts to the ELCA, in our ongoing ecumenical relationships, in our partnering with other organizations all transform us so that, through us and through all churches, God might transform the world with steadfast love. God is steadfast to us so that we might be steadfast others. God transforms us so that our church might help transform the world.

Today’s gospel is also about transformation. The presence of Jesus transformed the wedding in Cana. Imagine with me what happened. The wine gave out at the wedding, which was of course, a great social misstep; at a wedding you might run out of food, but not wine. The conversation between Jesus and his mother Mary provides us with a rare “unguarded exchange” before a “live microphone,” so to speak.

When the wine gave out, Jesus’ mother said to him, “*They have no wine.*” Imagine the look on Mary’s face, a mother looking “over the top of her reading glasses” at her son, kind of look. “*They have no wine*” is a statement that invited action from Jesus. Mary seems to have expected Jesus to do something about it. Jesus’ reply is no less interesting, “*Woman, what concern is that to you and me. My hour has not yet come.*”

Jesus knew what his mother was asking *and implying*. In this brief conversation, we see an understanding between Mary and Jesus that he *could do something* about the situation. There was an understanding that Jesus had spiritual gifts that could transform everything. Would he hold back? Mary already knew her Son Jesus would never hold back his gifts. Knowing that her Son would act,

Mary said to the servants, “*Do whatever he tells you.*” Mary knew something was about to happen - that much is clear in the gospel.

And so Jesus did act. He asked that six stone jars – each totaling 20-30 gallons each be filled with water. The total liquid volume would have been approximately 150 gallons. In other words, more than enough wine for a wedding. Jesus transforms everything with an abundance of grace.

The presence of Jesus transformed everything at the wedding, and the presence of Jesus Christ continues to transform everything in our lives through gifts of the Spirit. At the word of Jesus simple elements become sacraments. Jesus’ word transforms simple water into Holy Baptism, simple bread and wine into his body and blood in Holy Communion. Jesus’ word transforms everyday things, and us, into the means of grace for the world.

Mary knew that her Son Jesus could transform the everyday of human community into an abundance of grace. Mary was the first to take refuge in Jesus. Paul too knew the power of Jesus that had transformed his life, giving him spiritual gifts for mission to the world. Jesus transforms not only water, bread and wine, Jesus transforms us from sinful people into saints alive with gifts to share for the whole church, the world and all people.

If we seek refuge in him *we will certainly be transformed by him.* Mary knew this and so did Paul. Like Isaiah, they could not keep silent because they knew that Jesus transforms anyone who asks. Like Isaiah, Mary and Paul were saying, “*I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.*” They insisted that Jesus has the power to transform you and me, the church and the world.

Yet imagine if Jesus had followed through on his comment *not to act* because “*my hour has not yet come.*” Mary couldn’t imagine it. She said, “*Do whatever he tells you.*” This is the faith of people in mission. Yet we say we can’t do it now; we say we are weak or we don’t have enough; we say that it’s not our concern. But, like Mary, we also know that Jesus will transform anyone who asks, and through us, over and over, Jesus transforms the world.

We are people who have been transformed by water and the word in baptism, by bread and wine in the Eucharist, by the gifts of the Spirit *for a purpose* - so that we might not keep silent, rest or hold back until “*all nations shall see your vindication.*”

The strength for living and for mission as a church begins by taking refuge in Jesus. Take refuge in him, and he will transform you. Share your gifts, however small. Look upward and outward in mission beyond this church, so that this church might lead in mission. Take refuge in Jesus and he will transform you, the church and the world. Amen.