

## Weekly Reading – Monday, February 2, 2009

Here it is one of the year's great feast days, Ground Hog Day! Being in Toronto currently where we are on course to break the record for snowfall set in 1937 I have more than casual interest in the little critter's prognostications. Enough of that, the lessons before us are those for Sunday, February 8, 2009, which is the fifth Sunday after Epiphany and the fifth in Ordinary Time.

Isaiah 40: 21 - 31

The thing that makes this passage so powerful is the way it holds the tension of polarity between God's transcendence and God's immanence, between God's distance and God's closeness. Both are before us here, neither lost to the other. The vast transcendence of God comes first, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? . . . It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers . . . (he) who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." This is a vast, mysterious, sovereign God. Just when Israel, or its people, might say (27) "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right disregarded by my God?" the shift is made toward immanence, presence and reliability. And the shift begins with the repetition of the same words as earlier opened this passage, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" Then, "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth . . . he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the power less." In other words, for those who think they are themselves sovereign and in control, God is vast, awesome, fearful to behold and the people are like ants. But for those who "wait upon the Lord," who live their lives in full and faithful trust and awareness, God is steadfast, and a very present help in trouble (Ps. 46). The implications are two-fold: we shall know God best when we trust in God and not in our own powers alone. God is present and faithful to those the world counts as insignificant and powerless. "They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." And, second, those who do not revere God will discover they are "as nothing." (v. 23) While contemporary examples are always risky, the former Illinois Governor, Rod Blagojevich, seemed quite arrogant and taken with himself. His successor, Pat Quinn, seems to have a better self-estimate, beginning his term by quipping, "One day you're the peacock, next day you're the feather duster."

I Corinthians 9: 16 - 23

One of the things I have run into a good bit here in Canada and among United Church clergy and congregations is the notion that ordained ministers are "employees," who work for the congregation and are to do simply what a congregation's board tells them to do. There is even apparently some movement afoot among UCCanada clergy to unionize. Heavens! There's some grain of truth in this of course. A minister is accountable to a congregation, and sometimes congregations take advantage and behave badly. But it seems to me that something is amiss when ordained ministers no longer think of themselves as having a commission from the Lord and as ultimately accountable to fulfill this commission. The minister who cannot lay some degree of claim to Paul's words, "for an obligation is laid on me," probably is in the wrong line of work! Here in chapter 9 Paul indicates that he knows he is entitled to financial support. Verse 15, "Those who proclaim the gospel should get their

living by the gospel." Paul says that while such support is his "right," he has declined it because he wants it to be amply clear to those to whom he preaches and ministers and to himself as well that "I am entrusted with a commission." (verse 17) and that ministry is not in the last analysis about a paycheck or a pension but that commission from the Lord to preach the gospel. It is this charge or commission that compels Paul and that allows him to enter into the reality and experience of the groups and people to whom he speaks without being owned by them. Thus, "to the Jews I became a Jew, to the weak I became weak." (see previous chapter to understand the connotation of "the weak" in Corinth). But its all about the Gospel and bringing the word of what God has done in Christ. It is neither simply a "job," nor is it a popularity contest. While I suppose this emphasis on being "entrusted with a commission," could also be taken too far and result in ego and power trips, this does not seem to be our problem today, at least in the mainline Protestant world. Oh that more clergy would gird their loins and make it clear that they have a commission, that "an obligation is laid on me," (16) and that they are not simply employees of a congregation. Barth said to his congregation in Safenweil, "I do not speak to you of God because I am a pastor; I am a pastor because I must speak to you of God."

Mark 1: 29 - 39

At one level, or a cursory glance, this passage seems simply a report, scenes so to speak, from Jesus' early ministry in Galilee. Here's Jesus at the home of Simon and Andrew, bringing a healing touch to Simon's mother-in-law. There's Jesus healing the sick and casting out demons or ever growing crowds, "The whole city was gathered around the door." But the next morning Jesus is nowhere to be found. He's gone off to pray in a deserted place. Eventually Simon and boys catch up with him, and Simon Peter says, with no little exasperation, "Everyone is searching for you." Unspoken: "What's the deal? We've got a big crowd waiting!?" There's something here of the note struck in John 6 when the crowd comes searching for Jesus who has fed them wanting them to give them more bread. Jesus disappoints their expectation saying, "Work not for the bread that perishes, but for the bread that endures to eternal life." Certainly Jesus' response to Peter must have been at the least unexpected, perhaps more than that, utterly mystifying. Jesus said, "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." In other words, the point of Jesus' healing ministry and exorcisms is not to meet and satisfy all urgent or felt needs. That's not the point of Jesus' miracles. They are rather signs that point to the presence and power of God and invite human awakening, repentance and reorientation. The sign had been given and now it was time to move on and give it elsewhere. While Jesus is full of compassion, compassion is not what its all about. If it were, he would presumably have kept on until every last sickness was healed and possession overcome. The point is revelation, God is at work, the Kingdom has drawn near, repent and believe the good news (1: 14). This ties to the previous lessons. Like Paul, Jesus doesn't work for human audiences or human handlers. He works for God. An obligation has been laid upon him. And like the Isaiah text, God is both immanent, drawing close in Jesus, but also transcendent, on the move and beyond our control. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns."