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Morning Has Broken
Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Psalm 17; Mark 1: 29-31

Once when I was a child, my parents allowed me to attend a sleepover at a friend's house. I don't remember anything in particular about that weekend - I guess I had a fine time with my friend. But I do remember what it felt like to wake up in a strange place. I remember when the sun rose through the window that morning feeling so confused and disoriented. I remember rolling over in a bed that was not mine; looking around at a room that was unfamiliar to me; and leaping in alarm out of the bed and onto the floor. Where am I? What's happened to me? And then of course I can recall the relief of recognizing where I was, accepting that I was safe - and even feeling a little silly that I'd been so confused in the first place.

That's one standout memory, but a more typical memory is waking up to the smell of bacon rising up the staircase to my room. I would come down to a breakfast set by my mother around the countertop in the kitchen. Orange juice in the glass; eggs and toast, or maybe cinnamon rolls: the family gathered together for a breakfast that my mother had made on more Saturday and Sunday mornings than I can remember.

Psalm 17 sets the scene of a similar morning waking in the translation of Wilda Gafney. It is a sketch of God's love for humankind rich in the language and imagery of a household shared together. "Make your wondrous faithful love known," sings the Psalmist. "Keep me as the apple of the eye," she sings, in words that a parent might use for a child. "Hide me in the shadow of your wings," suggesting intimacy and protection. "I shall be satisfied when I wake, having seen your likeness." I don't wake up every morning - or perhaps even most mornings - to such an ideal scene, and I don't imagine many of us experience such serenity day by day. But hopefully all of us can locate in our own stories such a time of security, such a feeling of belonging, and familiarity. A time of waking up and feeling the love of God in a household filled with grace.

Mark's gospel presents a waking of a different sort. Maybe waking from not a restful night in a happy home but waking from a fevered, fitful sleep. It's the very beginning of Jesus's ministry, and the disciples are gathered with him.

Simon's mother-in-law is in bed, sick. "Come, quickly! What can be done?" We know so little about this situation, but we might make two assumptions safely. First, that the woman's illness was serious - serious enough to alarm Simon and his friends, serious enough that Simon brought Jesus to see what, if anything, could be done. Our fragile sense of health and wellbeing through the pandemic brings us closer to the urgency Simon's family must have felt around the illness of his mother-in-law. Without modern forms of care, we can only imagine that almost any illness in the ancient world was mysterious and humbling. They lived closer to the edge of existence than we do. There would be no saying, in the ancient world, for instance, that Omicron is not a serious illness. Rather than taking health for granted, there was a sense that serious illness could come for any of us at any time. So given the precarity of their circumstances and the urgency by which Jesus was called to her bedside, our second safe assumption is that this was an early test of Jesus and a sign of his promise and significance. Otherwise we would have no record of it, not even these three sentences. She is woken by the presence of Jesus at her bedside, taking her by the hand and lifting her up. Her fever breaks. According to Mark, it's Jesus's first healing. According to Mark, she immediately resumes her business. What did she see when her fever broke and she emerged from the fog and delirium? What do you think she noticed first? Did she see the kind face of Jesus standing at her bedside? Did she feel comforted by the gathered community of family and friends? Could she sense their relief and gratitude? Was there a spirit of celebration? Or joy?

The standard version of the text says that when she woke she began serving them, suggesting that there was food present. But Jesus's first healing was done for the illness of a woman, so we might interrogate that verb a bit. When she woke did she begin serving the men food because that is the role that women played? Or, if we go with Gafney's text - she didn't serve the gathered community, she "ministered to" those who assembled there. Mark's gospel is famously vague in its details, but we might surmise that in her waking she attended to the needs of those who had come face to face with the possibility of her death and who now saw in the presence of Jesus hope for the human condition. The miracle of her healing is a foreshadowing of the resurrection. In just three verses her experience shows the movement from sleep to waking, from darkness to light, from suffering to restoration, from death to fullness of life.

One might say that we have not yet woken up. One might wonder if we are still waiting for the fever to break. The word Covid-19 reminds us of the origins of the coronavirus, and that in 2022 we are now in the fourth calendar year that the world has been touched by this illness. We've only been dealing with it directly for two years, but thinking of it in terms of the calendar really puts the length of time in perspective. When will we wake up from this experience? World events certainly bring us no comfort. The Russian army at the border of Ukraine; Iran at the cusp of nuclear weapons; our own government disenfranchising voters. All of this feels like a fever that started years ago. Maybe we associate it with the rise of a former president. Maybe we think about it starting on 9/11, before today's college students were even born. Or the climate crisis that has its origins in the industrial revolution more than a century ago. We have been asleep for a long time. When will we wake up? When will this fever break?

Perhaps it helps to remember that people of faith have lived through many long generations of vexation and worry in the past. The prophet Zephaniah speaks from some two centuries of worry about the safety of Jerusalem and the geopolitical stability of Israel and Judah. The prophets speak of not occasional notes of worry, not of threats that come every one and a while - but of a long sustained period of uncertainty extending from one king to another crossing multiple generations. Jerusalem contends constantly with the threats of neighboring Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Egyptians and Ethiopians. For years they lived in the shadow Assyria's looming empire, their devastation and conquest assured sooner or later. The rich tradition of the prophets is forged not in a brief time of anxiety but through long exposure to conflict and suffering. From this sustained experience Zephaniah imagines the "day of the Lord," a time when the coming presence of God will ultimately mend and resolve the afflictions of God's people. "The great day of the Lord is near," Zephaniah declares, "near and hastening fast." The promise of God's coming sustains the faith of Israel not just in brief windows of great suffering but through long and painful trials. So "sing aloud, daughter Zion...Rejoice and exult with all your heart...the sovereign of Israel, Creator of the Heavens and Earth, is in your midst, daughter; no longer shall you fear evil."

This is our hope. It is not yet fulfilled but we know to expect it's coming: the day of the Lord will come. And when morning comes, when the fever breaks, what will you hear? The blackbirds singing? Mother setting the breakfast table? What will you see? Sunlight from heaven? Your loving family or community gathered

round? What will you smell? The day of the Lord promises the presence of God with the warmth of a loving household, with the kindness of a parent and child.

Our hope comes from the faith we share in the coming of this day. Arise! Shine! The glory of God is upon you.