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“God helps those who can’t help themselves” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (02/04/2024, Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray, Almighty God made the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

I went to college in the early 1990s, early to mid 1990s, and there was a rule there across the land, actually, about what posters you had to have in your dorm room when you were in college in the 1990s. Some of these have remained, some of the policies have changed, but when I was in school, there were two that were mandatory. One was a poster of Van Gogh's Starry Night, still very popular, and the other was the movie poster of Pulp Fiction, that was also up there. But for my roommates, that poster from Pulp Fiction, the film by Quentin Tarantino, that was the closest they would ever get to a Bible study, because, if you know that film by Mr. Tarantino, Jules Winfield, a professional, when he would meet clients, he would always yell a Bible verse at them to intimidate them, like any good preacher, right? That's what we do. He was supposedly from Ezekiel 2517, and he would bellow this verse at them, and you will know my name is the Lord. I say it's the closest they would ever get to a Bible study, not an actual Bible study, because that verse is not in the Bible. Tarantino made it up. It was a mashup of something from the Psalms and some Old Testament prophets, and he put

it together, some of it just out of whole cloth, because it sounded Bible-y, and he put that in there.
Bible-y is a word.
Don't email me.
But this is not the only example of people thinking stuff is in the Bible, and it's not.
Probably the single most famous verse that is not in the Bible, but people think it is, God helps those who, not in the Bible, know where, cover to cover. Genesis to Revelation, pick up that few Bible, read all 66 books of the Bible, and you will not come across that verse.
But many people think it's in there, because it sounds so much like what we hear from preachers and from Christianity, that spirituality is some sort of partnership, some dynamic duo where God does his part, and you do yours, and together you make beautiful music together.
It's cooperation.
It appeals to our ego.
I mean, gosh, I get to be in partnership with God, well, all right, me and the Lord, we work together.
You may have heard of them.
I've seen some things he's done, you have 70.
Yeah, I'm partners with him.
This idea is not new.
So all the way back to 1977, the film, O God, with George Burns and John Denver, George plays God, and he tells John that, you know, the whole plan was for God to make the earth and then give it to us, and now it's our part, you know, he did his part, now we do ours.
This is something that churches either state directly or imply all the time that they're sort of your part and then God's part, and we do it together.
You hear it in church mission statements about partnership or we cooperate with God to bring about the kingdom, et cetera, et cetera.
Some of the things you might hear are, you know, if you repent sincerely enough, you know, you've got to mean it, you earn us, then God will forgive you.
If you pray the right prayer, God will answer you.
If you have enough faith, you know, faith is like those fundraising thermometers, you know, if the giving goes up, the thermometer goes up, if your faith goes up and you get to the right level on the faith thermometer, then God will heal or do whatever it is you're asking.

We talk about this in terms of salvation.
Jesus is there standing at the door, but Jesus is a gentleman, and you've got to open the door.
He won't barge in.
You've heard this, right?
Jesus there with his top hat is monical and gentleman, Jesus.
You can see him right there on the ring screen.
He's at the door.
He's wrong, but there's no door, there's no handle, so you've got to open the door.
He wishes he could come in, but he can't.
This gets me a little nervous, this approach to spirituality.
I mean, if this is a partnership, if any of this is up to me, I don't know.
I mean, I'm the same guy that once thought for many years that the three amigos was the best movie ever made.
I'm the guy who, at the age of 24, you know, I could vote, I could drive, I could serve in the military, could buy alcohol, I was fully grown up, and I fell into a fountain in front of my in-laws.
We don't have to tell that story now.
Andrea can fill you in on the details, but that actually happened, and I was a grown man.
This morning, we heard this passage from the Gospel of Mark.
In this year, if you're coming to St. Olvins, you'll be hearing from Mark's Gospel.
We'll be reading it through all year.
There are four biographies of Jesus in the investment, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
We're reading Mark this year.
And Mark, just at the beginning of it here, we're meeting Jesus, and it's establishing the themes and ideas for his whole ministry.
And Mark is telling the story that I think has some really good news for people who fall into fountains, for people who are not good at studying their vibals, or partnering with God.
Maybe the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.
You know, you want to, you try to, but you're not so good at the religion stuff.
So if that's you, I think there's some real help here in Mark chapter one in this passage.
And we begin actually in a city, it's really a village, Capernaum.
And this is the hometown of St. Peter.
Peter and Andrew, now Peter was renamed, his originally was Simon, and that's how he's

referred to in this passage.

So Simon and Andrew brothers, Jesus is at their house in Capernaum, this little village

on the shore of the sea of Galilee, small fishing town, and they're there, Peter and Andrew and James and John and Jesus.

And Jesus is getting ready to go on tour, but he's sort of laying the groundwork.

And as they go into the house, they find this, Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

Now, fevers these days, you just take a Tylenol or two, get some rest, have some peteolite, and you'll be fine.

It's not a big deal.

You know, we think if you've got a fever, the cure is more cowbell.

You know, it's not something that's an SNL skit with Christopher Walken, highly commended to you.

But fevers are not things we get that worried about.

We know how to treat them, but in those days, if you reached that point in your illness,

it means your body was really ramping up defenses for something that you may or may not recover from.

It was pretty serious once the fever had set in.

So there she is lying in bed with a fever, and they tell Jesus at once about this fever.

And in verse 31, we read what happens next, Jesus came and took her by the hand and

lifted her up, then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Now, don't get kind of worried about, wow, she just got healed.

Like why does she have to start serving them, making pimento cheese sandwiches, you know, give her some rest.

In ancient culture, and in many places today, hospitality was required, and it brought

great honor to a family, to show hospitality to a guest.

So for her to not do that would be the most shameful thing she could think of.

So she honors her household and herself by honoring these guests.

So she shows this hospitality.

But the reason it says she got up and immediately started serving them is because Mark wants

to tell us that her healing was complete and instantaneous to such a degree that she did

not even remember that she had been sick.

And so she got right to the business of doing what any good person in those days would

do, which is to show hospitality to your guests.

The healing was complete and instant like she just forgot that she had even been sick.

It was so complete.

She didn't need to sit down and gather herself or rest for a bit or have a cup of tea.

She was just a hundred percent better immediately.

Now let me read those verses again, and I want you to, as I'm reading them, tell me when

she asks, when does she cooperate?

When does she ask Jesus for help?

Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever.

They told him about her at once.

Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, then the fever left her and she

began to serve them.

At what point did she cooperate?

At what point did the thermometer get to that level where she had enough faith for Jesus

to be able to heal her?

No where.

She's not even conscious at the beginning of the story.

She's bedridden with a fever.

She doesn't ask for healing.

She doesn't show great faith.

If God helps those who help themselves, she doesn't help herself anywhere in this story.

Jesus does all the work.

And this is what I want to offer you, and you know, you don't have to believe me because

this is not, I think, sadly a message that is preached as often as I think it should

be almost every sermon goes in the following order.

You're a sinner.

I got bad news.

You're a sinner.

But God forgives you.

You are forgiven.

Now let me tell you all the things you have to do so you can hold onto that forgiveness.

It always ends with what you have to do, how you have to partner and cooperate with God.

And Jesus here does all of it.

And this is emblematic.

This is sort of a symbol.

An image that shows us what all of his ministry will be like.

He will do the saving.

He will do the healing.

He will do the casting out of demons.

People don't cast the demons out of themselves.

People don't heal themselves.

Jesus does all the work from beginning to end full stop.
And that is such good news because that's what I need.
I fall into fountains.
I'm not good at being a Christian.
I don't let these robes fool you.
You can't control my emotions, though thoughts that pop into your head.
The anger that comes out of nowhere, all these things.
If you could control it, I would tell you to control it and you would do it.
But I've been telling you, you guys are the worst.
You have not improved.
I mean, if there's areas in your life where you can partner with God and that's working out more power to you, that is fantastic.
But I bet there are whole unexplored continents of your life where you seem not to be able to get it together.
And the good news about God, as he is revealed in Christ, is that he's not the one who helps themselves.
He is the one who helps you when you cannot help yourself.
And he does the work.
He is about to go throughout Galilee.
He'll be addressing the whole of the human condition.
He'll be teaching which addresses people's minds.
He'll be healing which addresses their bodies.
He'll be casting out demons which addresses their souls.
And all these things, they cannot fix for themselves.
Mine, body, soul, the whole person.
He will address it because that's what he does.
He is the one who does it.
Oh, he simply saves.
And whether people take Bible verses out of context or make them up out of whole cloth, the message so many places, is God helps those who help themselves.
And that is not Christianity.
That's not the Scripture's God helps, period.
God saves, period.
God does the work.
And this is what he's going to do.
It says in verse 8, he goes all throughout the region proclaiming the message.
The message that he shows Simon's mother-in-law in action.
The message that he will show the disciples throughout this ministry.
And of course, the message that he proclaims most clearly on the cross.
That's where he's ultimately going.
It's not you up on the cross there with him.
You're not helping him out.

He does that all by himself for you.

The only way you partner, the only way you cooperate is the fact that you sin, you backslide, you doubt.

Maybe that's what you contribute to that whole salvation thing.

Luther was once asked, Martin Luther, you know, what do you contribute to salvation?

He said sin and resistance.

But God does it all.

He is the one that comes to seek and save the lost IEU and me.

This is a message that you hear week after week in this place because it is the message

of the gospel.

The God's soul of the world that he gave has only begun son, not to give you more stuff

to do to make God happy, but to save you.

And we think it's so important that we graffiti it on the wall, back here, golden letters.

It's from Isaiah 40 and it's the Old Testament passage you heard read today.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

They that wait upon the Lord, not they that attend church faithfully every Sunday, not

they that pray in exactly the right way with the exact right level of sincerity and

earnestness, not they that go to Bible study and have the whole thing memorized, not they

that have always been nice to everybody and never lose their temper when they're driving.

They that always pray for people in line with them at HB and don't get mad at them.

You never get mad at the people at HB.

You pray for those people.

I mean, Andrew does.

No, it doesn't say they that do everything perfectly shall renew their strength.

It says they that wait those that sit in a position of I don't know where else to go or

what else to do and I'm going to need someone else to do this for me.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

It's carved into the wall.

We want you to know this because it is the gospel.

You will as everybody does revert to some sort of thinking that I do my part and God does his.

It's very normal for us egocentric humans, but just know that even in those places,

God will help you, God will save you, God will rescue you, and God will redeem you.

This is the message that Jesus proclaims in Capernaum, in Galilee, in

Jerusalem,
on Calvary and in Waco. Amen.