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## Believing and Knowing

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4, 2018*

*Mark 1:29-39; Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147*

At one point in my twenties I was dating a man who was the audio engineer for Showboat, which was a big musical theatre show that toured the country if you don't know it. So from time to time I got to hang out with the cast and the crew of the show, including a couple of times I got to go to the opening night cast party after the show had completed for the night. I remember the actors would almost always talk about the show from a critical and an analytical point of view. How had it gone? What part of the performance needed improvement? What were the obvious or hidden bloopers we could all have a good laugh or groan about? Some of the chatter was funny, like someone whose costume nearly came off just as they were walking onto the stage, and some of it was helpful evaluation of performance. All those things were good. But what always amazed me is that almost never did I hear the cast talk about the emotional impact of the show, or its meaning, or how it affected them or others. It was almost as if there were an unwritten rule forbidding people to talk about how the show moved them, even though as actors by definition they must have learned to empathize with their characters in order to play them. I myself as a nonprofessional was usually caught up into the sweep and drama of the stories, and so even though I enjoyed the cast parties and had to laugh and groan with the cast about their evaluation of the shows, it still always felt a little anticlimactic not to be able to talk about the stories with the people most intimately involved with them. I wanted to do more than be a critical observer from the outside: I wanted to experience the stories from the inside.

In today's gospel story from Mark, we are continuing to hear about the very beginning of Jesus' public life. Last week we heard that Jesus entered into the synagogue for the first time and began teaching. The story said that Jesus was teaching as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. That description got to me. What do you think that meant? Jesus obviously had no authority in a technical sense. He wasn't a religious leader in the traditional sense of the word – the story goes out of its way to point out that he wasn't like the scribes, who were students of the scriptures who usually taught in the synagogues. I think Jesus' authority came not just from his knowledge about the scriptures but his deep personal experience of the love of God. Just a few verses earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus goes to the Jordan river to be baptized by John. And there's this beautiful description: it says that just as Jesus is coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and he heard a voice saying You are my Son, the Beloved. I am very pleased with you. Then he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted by satan, which basically just means being offered every opportunity to rely on something other than the love of God to get his needs met. So he's experienced personally the overwhelming love of God, and he's learned to rely on that love in the desert where there are no distractions and not even the bare necessities of life. And from that place, the place where head knowledge about God meets an unshakeable inner experience of God, he teaches in a way that startles and amazes people because it's so different.

Some of you have maybe heard about what Carl Jung said when he was asked if he believed in God. He was in an interview and the person said, When you were young, you went to church, right? He said, yes of course. The interviewer asked, did you believe in God when you were young? Absolutely, he said. Then the interviewer asked, Do you believe in God now? Jung paused. Then he said, I don't have to believe in God. I know.

Jesus knew the love of God from a deep well of tested and refined experience. It changed the way he saw his scriptures, and he taught from that place. And it woke people up. Then this week's story picks up, and Jesus follows his teaching with healing the sick and demon possessed, far into the night because the whole town

has crowded the door of where he is staying. When he finally leaves long before dawn to pray, his disciples hunt him down and say that the people want more of him, and he responds by saying that they need to go to other towns because he came to preach the message to everyone, not just one group of people. When I first read that I wondered if Jesus meant that all the healing he had just done was incidental to his primary purpose of teaching, but nothing could be further from the truth. In the original language to preach means to make known. Jesus came to make known the kingdom of God, which is as much about the heart and body as it is about the head. When Jesus was baptized, he saw the heavens split open and the Spirit descending on him here, on earth. God's kingdom is always about bringing heaven to earth, it's about the place where heart and mind and body meet. It's as much about healing Simon's mother in law from a fever, as it is about teaching the scriptures. This might be why over and over in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the evil spirits to be silent and not tell people who he is—because words and ideas can sometimes get in the way, they can sometimes distract from the experience of God which is always about love and healing and liberation.

In the reading from Isaiah today the prophet says that God does not get tired, and that those who hope in God will renew their own strength. Jesus shows us what that looks like. God can encounter each of us in each moment of our lives with the endless patience born of unconditional love, just as the prophet Isaiah describes God knowing each star of the universe and calling each of them by name. God can encounter this community and this country and everyone in it, like Jesus met people at the front door of Simon's house and healed them all.

Jesus says, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come very near to us. Let us have eyes to perceive the presence of God, closer than our own breath. Let us have minds that wonder and wrestle and imagine. And let us have hearts that are soft enough to be moved and forgiven and healed.