



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## CREATION AND COOKIES

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 8, 2015

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39 (find them here)

Sermon text: Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? Isaiah 40:21; Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Mark 1:30-31

**M**y mother-in-law was a sweet Italian-American housewife who loved to bake cookies. She was famous for her cookies in the neighborhood—and the neighborhood was pretty much the extent of her world. She never learned to drive, or write a check. But she raised her two children, and one step-son from my father-in-law's first marriage. She went to church, every day, good Catholic soul, even though she could never receive communion as she had married a divorced man.

I think of her as I read this story of Jesus healing the fever of Simon's mother-in-law, and offer a prayer for her and ask for her intercession for us (for surely she is among the saints, having suffered dementia and living in a nursing home in a pretty much vegetative state for 19 years until her death at age 99). She loved me for loving her daughter, and boy did she love Eli, her only grandchild. Unfortunately she lapsed into dementia when he was small boy, only four years old. But it is very interesting—I think a sign of the Holy Spirit—that just this week I found among my papers some poems that Eli dictated to me after a visit to his grandmother in the nursing home when he was five (actually, as he noted at the time, five and three quarters)—I taught him the “roses are red, violets are blue” schema and he ran with it.

We were living in Union Theological Seminary in New York city at the time, and I submitted the poems to the school newspaper—and so they are preserved. Here they are:

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
The river is rippling  
And I am with you.

Ancient is good  
Dark makes you sleepy  
The sun wakes you up  
And makes you so happy.

Buttons are silver  
And all different colors  
Where is my son  
Who watches the whales swim  
And the horses run?

Whoa. Reading them again reminded me of the feeling that I had when he came up with them—that the Holy Spirit was part of the action: “The river is rippling and I am with you.” I wrote at the time that “these powers were dictated to his father on Sunday evening, September 24, 1995, after returning home from a visit with his grandmother in a nursing home. She is 82 years old and unfortunately in very poor mental and very frail physical condition. However difficult her suffering is to observe from her daughter Mary’s vantage point, Eli seems determined not to forget that “ancient is good,” even as he thinks about his future children.”

Where is my son who watches the whales swim and the horses run?

That line makes me think of Isaiah—and the book of Job—where there is wonderful poetry and a strong and clear theological affirmation that there is only one God, the creator of the whole universe and all that is in it. We have heard a bit of a prophetic poem of Isaiah about how the Holy One of Israel is the LORD, the eternal God, creator of earth’s farthest bounds.

Some of the earlier verses in this magnificent soliloquy are worth hearing as well:

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?

Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” (Isaiah 40:12-14).

The answer, of course, is no one. No one compares to God. There is none other—no other gods, no other being, no cosmos—that we can compare. And we have gotten a pretty big picture of the universe these days.

I watched a video last week that panned around within the world’s largest photograph—taken by Hubbell of the Andromeda galaxy. I posted it on my facebook page if you want to see for yourself (just go to Matt Calkins and ask to be my friend. please.) The warp and woof of stars in the photograph is so dense it almost looks solid, yet shimmering, and it goes on and on, the distances unimaginable, the grandeur beyond human ken.

Yet we claim, as Christians, as people of the Book, that God cares for us. Us little people. The unfathomable immensity, the infinite and unknowable God, the font and ground and end of all being—who holds the stars in hand as so many grains of sand—knows and loves us? Can this be? Is it true? God loves you—yes, you. And the other 7 billion people, and all the other creatures and all that God has created?

Yes, says the prophet: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?”

At the end of this morning’s reading: “God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Somehow, the LORD God, creator of heaven and earth, is also the Holy One of Israel. And the Holy One of Israel is none other than God with us, Emmanuel, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He came to teach and to heal. We follow so that we in turn may be part of the kingdom of God. We find, with all the saints who have gone before, that although this life can

be hard and fate can be cruel—witness the last years of my mother-in-law— nevertheless, it is also beautiful, a gift, and an opportunity to love and care in our turn and in our generation. We will pass away like the grass. But somehow, we will also pass on—to our children, to God’s heart, into eternity—like those who march on and do not grow weary, who run and not feel faint, who soar, indeed, as on eagles’ wings.

Is that a feeling you want to have? I certainly do. When I look to nature I am awed by the grandeur and beauty of creation—and so by extension the greater mystery of the source. When I grow weary in the hard parts of life

and puzzled by the suffering of good people, I look to Jesus—who faced the hard parts too, and suffered and died, on the cross, a terrible death— who yet mounted up. Whose Spirit still inspires, whose teaching still is the most powerful on earth—unarmed truth overcoming evil, love conquering even death. When I look to Jesus I feel stirring within me a confirmation of God’s love and a sense of God’s call. That’s the Holy Spirit. I have felt it more than once. And I can still smell those cookies coming out of the oven. Praise God.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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### **Between Us and the Stars**

Come away from the din.

Come away to the quiet fields, over which the great sky stretches,  
and where between us and the stars, there lies but silence;  
and there, in the stillness let us listen to the voice that is speaking within us.

### **Jerome K Jerome (1859-1927)**

This poem was set to music by Timothy Takach (b.1978) and performed by the Vassar College Choir under the direction of Christine Howlett in a performance on February 5, 2015 at the Skinner Hall of Music, Vassar College

