

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
5th Sunday after the Epiphany/Year B
February 4, 2018
Text: Mark 1:29-39

“Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

The song, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” was written by Thomas Andrew Dorsey. He wasn’t always known by his given name. Dorsey was a song writer who went by several names including Georgia Tom. Dorsey immersed himself not just in one genre but two—the world of blues and jazz and that of gospel though some churches were not ready for his up tempo offerings. As was in the case in many a young person, he was energetic and highly motivated, so much so that Dorsey found himself burning his candle on both ends and because of that by the age of 21 he suffered the first of two nervous breakdowns, the second leaving him unable to play music at all. Dorsey recovered but several years later his life was once again turned upside down when he received a telegram that his first wife, Nettie, died giving birth to son. If the loss of his beloved were not enough, two days later the baby died. He recounted in a videotaped interview that the death of his wife and child made no sense and he was left a broken man. Well-meaning friends tried to comfort him but comfort did not come then or ever. With his spirit broken and at the end of his wits, Dorsey began to fervently pray to God. And as he talked he began to sing. And he went on to write one of the most well-known and recorded gospel songs of all time, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” a song Dorsey said, came directly from God. Dorsey never shied away from giving glory to God for his gift of music. By the time of his death at age 93, Dr. Thomas A. Dorsey had written several hundred songs and was very much revered and sought after, his music known all over the world. He is deemed as the “father of gospel music.”

Perhaps we can relate to the feeling of powerlessness that sometimes comes in life. Changes in our circumstances, relationships, the death of a loved one, illness in someone we know or in ourselves; anxiety in watching the world around

us leaves us feeling hollow, not quite ourselves but living in the shadow of our true selves, living inwardly instead of outwardly.

Today's gospel passage from Mark picks up right after last week's scene in the synagogue. Jesus had gone there with a small band of disciples. He had begun to teach and all who listened were astonished when he was interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit and Jesus healed him and made him whole. And now, he has put in a full day and it is time to eat and rest. So Jesus and his cohorts go to Simon Peter's house where he and they can unwind and be themselves.

They arrived at the house and there are no smells of meat or fish or vegetables cooking. No bread baking in the oven. Simon Peter went into a spare room and came back hesitant to share the news-his mother-in-law is not well, in fact, she has been in the bed all day. There are no words that voice displeasure. Only a voice of concern- 'Where is she?'

Jesus goes in and places his hand on hers. It would not be the first and last time Jesus places his hands on someone during his ministry. She feels his hand touch hers and he begins to pull her up. She rises up at once-healed and whole. She didn't opt to rest or take it easy for the remainder of the evening. She got up from her sick and "she began to serve them." Our modern ears might hear that she went to find whatever was around-a few dates or figs or pieces of fruit or bits of smoked fish, some leftover bread. But the Greek text says *diakoneo* meaning 'to serve'. So she went about her work serving a real meal. She served as Martha served when Jesus visited his friends in Bethany. It also the same kind of serving that Jesus spoke of when he said "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Simon Peter's mother-in-law did not serve because she had to or because it was her "supposed" place to serve, her "duty" as a woman. By being restored to full health by the healing touch of Jesus she did what any follower of Christ is expected to do-to rise up and be of service to someone else.

Mark tells us that later that evening Jesus found himself facing a long line of folks who appeared at Simon's door for healing. Many of the sick and demon-plagued were healed and restored. And that Jesus found a time while it was still dark to go off to a deserted place to pray. We don't know what the content was of his prayer but Jesus knew he could go to his Father in prayer and what he needed to restore his strength. And when he was found the next morning he was ready to continue on with his ministry, to serve other people in other places.

The daily grind and struggles and complexities in life we all face are enough to keep us down, to paralyze us, to keep us hold up in the “safety” of the walls we create for ourselves making us think that any action on our part might be seen as inadequate or make no difference at all. But we have a God who restores and heals; who lifts up the lowly. We read in our first lesson from Isaiah that

He 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.

We serve a God who wants nothing more than our hearts to love and for us to use our hands and feet in service to help build up God’s kingdom here on earth where healing and wholeness and fullness of life can be realized. As St. Teresa of Avila said (and I have used this quote many times) we are the hands and feet of Jesus. We may not be able to rid North County of hunger but we can give one can or several to our local food pantries. We can make a meal for someone who needs it. We may not be able to clothe an entire family but we can certainly clear our closets of our excess so that a women or a man can interview for a job so that they can afford to put clothes on the backs of their children. We may not be able to house an individual but we can show hospitality and courtesy to those we invite in and those who come on their own seeking a glimpse of God. We may not be able to clean up or tear down unfair systems but we can vote. We can write letters and make phone calls to leaders and officials. We may not have the numbers we want or a ginormous bank account or endowment fund but we do have brilliant minds, dreamers, visionaries, and faithful and faith-filled and praying people in our midst. We certainly can’t do everything but we can do *something* in service to others.

We have a Savior who is always near. Like Simon’s mother-in-law, we have Someone who will enter in and take us by the hand and lift us up from whatever ails us; *up* from whatever keeps us from being who we are meant to be; *up* so we can do our part in healing our community and the world.

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand. Precious Lord (we pray), take *our* hands, lead *us* on. Precious Lord, take *our* hands, and help *us* to stand. Take away all hopelessness, doubts, and fears. Restore us for your mercy’s

sake that we might be about continuing the mission started by you for the glory of God. Help us to be servants who serve. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Precious Lord, Take My Hand, written by Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932

“Thomas A. Dorsey”-Wikipedia

“Thomas A. Dorsey Biography-Musician Biographies”, written by John Morrow

Thomas Dorsey on “Precious Lord” interview-YouTube