

*In the name of God who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

It is seldom a good idea to agree to go camping with your boss; but there I was, a new teacher, and the district director of foreign languages thought that I would just love to bring my wife and infant son along on a trip to Lancaster PA to attend a German festival. She was bringing her teenage daughter and her friend, so there was just enough room in her sedan for all of us. Behind the sedan she towed a fifth wheel camper. We got a late start, which had everyone edgy and short-tempered, and somewhere along the PA turnpike late that night we ran out of gas. My boss pulled as far off the road as she could, but truthfully, we were still hanging out in the lane a bit, and we were just past the crest of a hill. The big trucks which passed couldn't see us until they got over the hill, and they seemed 'way too close.

By some providence, we had rolled to a stop right next to a sign announcing that a service area was just one mile down the highway. So, taking the only flashlight we experienced campers had thought to bring along, I began to walk in that direction, leaving the others huddled despondently on a hillside. When I arrived at the gas pumps I was able to persuade the manager to lend me a gas can, and when he asked me how much gas I wanted, I told him to fill the can. It was a five gallon can. And then, somewhere on the long trip back to the car I dropped and broke the flashlight. Eventually I could see the emergency flashers on our vehicle, but it seemed they were awfully slow and dim. As I was to find out, the draw from the trailer was quickly depleting the battery, and my boss was beginning to be worried about having enough power to start up the engine.

To everyone's relief, I finally arrived and, ducking out of the way of the passing trucks, I fumbled with the heavy can and the car's gas tank opening in the dark until I was pretty sure I had put in enough to try starting up. The car slowly groaned and gasped, but did not start. The emergency lights had given up the ghost, and we had become just a shadowy presence on the dangerous roadside with dwindling hope, as tired and temperamental as the Hebrews of the Exodus. We waited in hopes that the battery might regain some residual charge, and tried again...but with no better results. In the dark I removed the air cleaner and lifted the heavy can to try priming the carburetor, but that didn't seem to have any effect either. We waited some more. It was well past midnight. I decided to try priming once again, trying to guide the flexible metal hose from the can into the carburetor in complete darkness, and as I did it occurred to me that I couldn't hear any liquid splashing and didn't even smell any gas. I felt down at the end of the nozzle, only to find that I had not unscrewed and taken off the little metal cap! I tried to think of a way not to admit this to my boss...and my wife, but my expletive expression of surprise had given me away, and the rest of the ride to Lancaster was endured pretty much in silence.

In today's Gospel reading from the first chapter of Mark, Jesus takes the cap off! As you may remember from our Epiphany readings so far, Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan, tempted in the wilderness, introduced to the first disciples, recognized by an unclean spirit, and has heard that his fame is spreading throughout Galilee. He goes to Simon's house and learns that his mother-in-law is sick with a fever. Remember that Simon will earn the nickname 'Peter', and the reference to his mother-in-law would

indicate that he was married, something that we don't hear about again. In any case, the disciples tell Jesus about her illness 'at once', and Jesus heals the woman immediately. As we've noticed during the previous readings from Mark, there is a sense of urgency about it, using words like that. Jesus had just cast out the demon in the synagogue, and by that evening, the townspeople were bringing all their sick and possessed to him at Peter's house.

Early the following morning, while everyone else is still asleep, Jesus goes off in the dark by himself, without a flashlight, to pray. It's possible that all this urgency, all this activity, has drained his battery. Perhaps he prays for his energy to be restored. Perhaps he prays for guidance as he ponders just what to do next. Perhaps he is learning just what it means to be a Messiah. When the disciples wake up to find him missing, they hunt for him, bringing him the message that everyone is asking for him; all are in need of his saving grace; all are anxious for his healing message. The disciples tell him, in so many Hebrew words, that the people are waiting with expectation for him to return with the fuel, that their darkness can be overcome. Now refreshed, and having seen the way forward, Jesus tells them to pack up the camping gear, it's time to go on a preaching tour, time to bring the fuel of his message to others, time to take the cap off. It's time to begin his ministry, the sacred mission for which he came out from Nazareth.

Goes to prove that Jesus is smarter than your average twenty-something German teacher! God is wiser than we; God knows the potency of the fuel with which the Messiah is entrusted, how it will start the engines of redemption and reconciliation throughout the world. God always knows when to take the cap off. Psalm 147 reminds us that 'Great is our Lord and mighty in power, there is no limit to his wisdom.' With the fuel of creativity, 'He covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth; He makes grass to grow upon the mountains and green plants to serve mankind. He provides food for flocks and herds and for the young ravens when they cry.' The prophet Isaiah asks impatiently: Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 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.

Lucky for us, for we are called in these last generations to be Christ's body in the world ourselves, to continue fueling the holy message in our own time and place. Please God, renew our strength, that we may run and not be weary, walk and not faint, for the message to be proclaimed is as urgent today as it was in ancient Galilee. Our lives in faith, our lives in Christ, are a grand preaching tour, for which we need daily recharging and refueling ourselves. Lucky for us, too, that we have a parish with a heart as large as the one here at St. John's! Thanks to the abiding love in this parish, none of us is out there in the darkness along the highway carrying our heavy load of ministry alone. We attend to one another, for the sake of friendship and for the sake of the holy fuel we bear. We encourage one another, pray for one another, and remind each other to take off the cap when the time is right. I say luckily, but of course, luck has nothing to do with it; our life here together is part of God's dream for us, a dream we cherish, a dream for which we are ever thankful. May this parish always proclaim the message, for that is what we have come out to do. Amen.