There is ever something compelling and exhilarating about the glad surprise. The emphasis is upon glad. [The glad surprise] carries with it the element of elation, of life, of something over and beyond the surprise itself.”¹ These are the words of theologian Howard Thurman. In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, we see numerous examples of glad surprises: Jesus called the first disciples—glad surprise, Jesus taught in the Capernaum synagogue and stirred hearts—glad surprise, and in the same setting Jesus delivered a man from the control of an unclean spirit—glad surprise. It is no wonder news about Jesus’ ministry spread across the region.

We begin in verse 29 as Simon, Andrew, Jesus and two other newly called disciples left the synagogue in Capernaum and planned to return to Simon and Andrew’s home. Once home they would announce their new vocation to their loved ones. They were no longer fishermen having immediately accepted Jesus’ invitation to begin fishing for people. We may presume the brothers had many stories to share about what they witnessed
after retiring their fishing nets and began travelling with Jesus in these beginning days of his teaching, preaching and healing ministry. I wonder whether bringing guests home was Simon and Andrew usual practice. Were they the kind of people who delighted in bringing guests home to receive Galilee-style hospitality?

The income Simon and Andrew earned as fishermen in Galilee would have been modest. Extending hospitality was not dependent on income. With a modest household income their home in Galilee could be comfortable, welcoming and the place they received encouragement. Their home could be a safe haven free of outside authority and control. Safe havens are not dependent on income. Home is normally not a contested space. It is the soft place to land and the firm place from which to launch. It is shelter from the storms of life. It is a place of peace where souls are refreshed. It is where values are shaped and generosity is learned. It is a place for expressing creativity. It is where sorrows and challenges are faced together.

For Indigenous people, Black people and People of Color home is the setting in which you are not subjected to the Disfiguring Gaze. Home is where you are reminded you are who God says you are. Inside our homes we throw off the misshaping identities the world would impose. We learn about collective work and responsibility. Upholding commitment to the community is emphasized. Often our homes are intergenerational and that carries the special possibilities of passing deep wisdom and faith
and the possibility of growth prompted by fresh insights and childlike curiosity.

Westminster continues to believe we are called to join others in working for just housing policies so that all people have access to stable affordable housing and experience the joys and benefits of home. Having stable quality housing is the critical success factor for employment, academic achievement and good health. Westminster has invested in the development of affordable housing and we hope to do more. We are coming alongside our neighbors who are precariously housed and living in shelters. We are learning how to use our voices to advocate for just housing policies. We are learning how to listen to our neighbors with lived experiences of homelessness. We are learning how to follow the leadership of our siblings in Street Voices of Change and we are seeking to amplify their voices.

So, Simon and Andrew bringing guests to the household they shared is significant because the social, intellectual and spiritual development that happens in the setting of home is a gift. Simon, Andrew, and their guests were all set to experience hospitality orchestrated by Simon’s mother-in-law BUT they learned as soon as they arrive she was not well.

Jesus took Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her body. Jesus had a glad surprise for Simon’s mother-in-law.
She was restored “and she began to serve them.” (Mark 1:31) The author of Mark uses only six words to describe her response. With so few words we might miss something quite amazing. Simon’s mother-in-law took her place in working toward the promise of the kingdom...took her place in fully cooperating with the in-breaking reign of God.

In the few moments between being lifted by her hand and the fever leaving her body she asked herself: what is it I can offer to support more people having an experience like this? What is it I can do to demonstrate I am beginning a new journey because of the change that has come over me? What actions will demonstrate or testify to how my faith has been reshaped today?

Immediately, Simon’s mother-in-law knew that she had within her the gifts and the power to offer hospitality to Jesus and his followers to fuel their shared ministry. Her grateful response to Jesus taking her by the hand and lifting her up was to use her hands!

That day Simon’s mother-in-law used her hands in time-honored ways seeking to offer Jesus, her household and community something entirely new. She offered something that she hoped responded to the transformation instigated by the kingdom of God coming close.
She surrendered all that she had and all that she was toward the promise of the kingdom coming right there in Galilee...right there in a setting well-familiar to her. Through her actions she seconds what Jesus said about the kingdom coming near.

Simon’s mother-in-law took her place in the work of God. She took herself seriously. She did not underestimate her agency—she had faith in the one who took her hand and she purposefully used the means available to her to do what she could for the promise of the coming kingdom. Her hope for others to experience the kingdom coming near became a reality as the city gathered in the front yard of the household she nurtured.

Simon’s mother-in-law stands in the long tradition of those whose imaginations have been touch by God such that they turn toward the promise of the kingdom of God and aim their agency toward its coming. This first Sunday in February, Black History Month, I am thinking about African American people whose imaginations have been touched like Simon’s mother-in-law.

Three years ago this month I had an opportunity for a long visit at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN. I noticed the museums curators thoughtfully depict the unnamed who positioned themselves, just as Jesus did, to bring the power of God’s kingdom to change oppressive conditions.
The museum includes an exhibit describing the Montgomery Bus Boycott from 1955 – 1956. Women like Simon’s mother-in-law were the quiet force that caused the 13-month boycott to succeed. Mary Fair Burks organized for civil rights through the Women’s Political Council in Montgomery and she calls us to remember, “the nameless cooks and maids who walked endless miles for a year to bring about the breach in the walls of segregation” (Burks, “Trailblazers,” 82).”iii By faith these unnamed cooks and maids took themselves seriously and assigned themselves the role of sign-bearers of the coming kingdom.

We ought to remember the name of Ms. Oseola McCarty whose generous action some 26 years ago were like Simon’s mother-in-law offering what she had to witness to something she hoped was coming. Ms. McCarty lived her entire life in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and she made her living laundering and ironing clothes from the age of 8 until retiring at 86. She did not use a washing machine because it did not clean clothes to her satisfaction and standards—she used her hands. Ms. McCarty was a woman of deep faith who imagined the resources God entrusted to her hands could lift the financial burden keeping her young neighbors from enrolling in college. She envisioned students having the opportunity to do what she could not in her lifetime. She said, “I can’t do everything. But I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do I will do.”iv She gave more than half of her life savings to the University of Southern Mississippi and this generous regard for the well-being of others points us toward the coming kingdom.
The late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg wrote a book, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored*. In this book he set out to recover the fullness of some of the key words we use in our faith talk. In our hands—in our life together of worshipping, studying and serving—important concepts for our faith have come to mean something too far from their biblical meaning. Borg suggested our faith talk partially points us toward and partially teaches us about God’s enduring love and presence with us. According to Borg *repentance* is one of the key words for which the fullness of meaning needs to be recovered. He wrote, “In the Jewish Bible, the Christian Old Testament, “repentance” means “to return” – that is, to return from exile, to return to life in the presence of God, to a life centered in God. [And in] the Christian New Testament, the word “repentance” carries this meaning, and one more. The root of the Greek word for “repentance” means “to go beyond the mind that you have.”

Mark described, “Jesus came to Galilee...saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1: ) To a people whose self-understanding and faith practice had been undermined by the influence of Roman ways of being, Jesus came with a decolonizing message to repent, go beyond the mind that you have and see how near the kingdom has come...go beyond the mind that you have and see the kingdom is coming.
Simon’s mother-in-law, the maids and cooks who boycotted in Montgomery, Ms. Oseola McCarty and so many others whose shoulders we stand on were willing to go beyond the minds they had.

How would God assess our willingness to repent—our willingness to take the journey beyond what we presently know and imagine?

When God has equipped us with good courage and the ability to endure being uncomfortable to journey beyond the minds that we have, how often do we resist?

Especially now in these circumstances of global pandemic, heightened attention to poverty and racism and our fractured public life, how will we sustain our commitment to be a community aiming our faith toward the promise of God’s kingdom coming right here where we are?

There are forces at work causing us to hesitate to go beyond what we know. But now is the time to reckon with those forces and, like Simon’s mother-in-law, to allow nothing to keep us from aiming our agency toward the promise of the kingdom coming.

If we are to become a people who find our place in God’s work of justice and mission, we will have to allow God to continuously change our minds and our hearts. We will have to learn now to abide by new spiritual practices so that we discern where God really is active and humbly join in God’s work.
Our response to Jesus’ call to repent and believe the good news that God’s has come near is not a one-time single act. It is the journey of faith that we are initiated into through the waters of baptism and it is a journey we continue until we die.

As we take this journey because of Jesus Christ, we can be confident God is with us always.

Theologian Howard Thurman advises us across time,

Take courage therefore:
When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father’s full giving is only begun.\(^vi\)

Let’s remind each other this is *The Glad Surprise* we share. Thanks be to God.

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\(^i\) Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman “The Glad Surprise” in *Meditations of the Heart*, 108  
\(^ii\) Visit the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel virtually via this recording [https://youtu.be/2fSomKsR_lM](https://youtu.be/2fSomKsR_lM)  
\(^iii\) Resource available through the King Institute at Stanford University [https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/montgomery-bus-boycott](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/montgomery-bus-boycott)  
\(^iv\) [https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/people/hall-of-fame/detail/oseola-mccarty](https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/people/hall-of-fame/detail/oseola-mccarty)  
\(^v\) [https://marcusjborg.org/repent-and-return/](https://marcusjborg.org/repent-and-return/)  
\(^vi\) Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman “The Glad Surprise” in *Meditations of the Heart*, 110