

Rise Up
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
February 4, 2024

Today's reading comes from the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, generally recognized as the first written gospel. The book relays a succession of Jesus' mighty works, signs of the presence of God's power and realm, for those who have eyes to see.

Mark's style is sparse and to the point, there's not a lot of detail in these pages. Reading, it can feel like you are speeding down a highway of words and images, immediately going from one to the next. There's a sense of urgency in the writings, this is important! Pay attention!

In the first 28 verses, Mark shares the story of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, Jesus going into the wilderness (that's only two sentences in this gospel, by the way), the calling of the disciples, the proclamation that God is here!

According to Mark, Jesus' first day of ministry is the Sabbath, and he heals a man in a synagogue. Talk of Jesus spreading throughout Galilee and momentum is growing.

Let's pray for the spirit to illuminate our text: Startle us, O God, with the truth of your abundant love revealed in scripture this day, that it might take hold in our hearts, and form us into more faithful disciples. AMEN

Mark 1:29–39 (NRSV)

²⁹As soon as they* left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' ³⁸He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. AMEN.

How desperately we all long for healing, on a personal, communal, societal, and cosmic level.

We long for a day when poverty will be eradicated, and racism, dismantled. We pray for the end of cancer and other devastating illness that impact so many lives. We yearn for the restoration of our earth with clean water, air, and soil. We ache for peace among people in all nations, and for the full inclusion of God's people, for the end of pain and suffering once and for all.

For this reason, today's scripture can feel really personal. I know I'm not alone in that I've prayed for a miraculous cure for sick members of my family, friends, and with and for so many of you. And while sometimes a cure is found, and a miracle occurs, other times it doesn't. And it can break your heart.

Jesus stories, and our stories, affirm that while a cure may not happen, healing is possible for all.

God's kingdom, with the inbreaking of Jesus with his cures, miracles, and wonders, has happened, it has not yet been realized in our world. And so, we continue on, learning and praying.

After the synagogue Jesus and his disciples return to Simon Peter and Andrew's house to find that Simon's mother-in-law is sick with a fever. Back in ancient times, with no ibuprofen or aspirin or antibiotics, a fever could not just make you miserable for a short while but could be deadly. We don't know anything about the fever, we only know that a beloved mother was unwell and unable to be up and around, unable to fulfill her calling, because of illness.

The text says that Jesus goes to her and "lifts/raises her up." The Greek word here "egiero" is the same one that will later be in used by Mark to describe Jesus himself in Mark 16:16, when the women are looking for Jesus in the tomb and the angel says that he has been raised up. Mark uses this word "egiero" in many healings (Mark 9:27) It suggests a new strength, restoration, reinvigoration, a reawakening, a return is given to those who have been incapacitated by illness or an unclean spirit or even death, so that they can rise up and take their place in community, in the world and find dignity and purpose again.

I used to get irritated by this story. Good heavens, Simon's poor mother-in-law laid low with a fever and the first thing we see her do is pop out of bed and wait on the men?

But I learned that the verb "serve" here is "diakoneo" which is the same verb that Jesus uses to describe his own ministry in (Mark10:45), when Jesus says that he came to serve and not to be served.

You all recognize that it is the same root for “Deacon,” one who is the hands and feet of Christ, a server. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is the first character in Mark’s gospel who shows true discipleship, let’s call her the first deacon. Realistically, for her to even been mentioned in the story meant that she was part of the early Jesus movement in a significant way, as women were. We might imagine that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was a woman who felt a call to hospitality, something that was prized in the ancient world, and especially used in the Jesus movement. Hospitality, in the context of the coming reign of God, was considered an art and an honor.

Word about this healing gets around and people are coming to Jesus from all over. He’s healing and casting out demons. He retreats to pray and regroup, and then continues to move onward, fully aware of his mission and what awaits him.

Illness in Jesus day was a significant thing as it still is today. Being sick meant that you were not able to make a living or contribute to the well-being of one’s household or community. Being ill came at a high social cost, feeling isolated and without worth. We understand how good it feels to simply be back in community after a cold or broken bone!

Jesus’ healing means much more than a cure and the cessation of symptoms, but over and over, healing brings about a restoration of worth and reinstitution of community. It is the story of grace. Simon’s mother-in-law is a good example of this. Throughout Mark’s gospel, this social dimension of healing is a key theme.

As commentator Sarah Henrich writes, “there is nothing ordinary about life in community. Jesus wields the power of God Almighty to bring about participation: It is God’s will for creation to be serving in community with others. (Sarah Henrich, Working Preacher)

The story of Simon Peter's mother-in-law was on my mind this weekend, the start of Black History Month, as I finally made the trip to Alabama to make plans for a Civil Rights Pilgrimage for Oak Grove this summer with Kathy Howell and Deb DeMeester.

Over and again, I was struck by the power of the words of Jesus, "Rise Up" as we heard the stories of the masses of Afro-Americans who gathered in churches for years prior to marching, protesting, boycotting and so on. Men and women, children, and youth, coming together, rising up, facing barking dogs and water cannons, bombs and discouragement with the goal of the healing and restoration of a people, of a nation.

As I saw our scripture through the lens of the early days in the civil rights movement, I recognized that Jesus' story of healings is all about grace, and community. It allowed me to take this story of a personal healing, and be curious about how communities, nations, the world might heal.

As we three talked about it, Kathy reminded us that we cannot begin to heal until we really know what the illness, brokenness, pain, is until we know the diagnosis and can face it with courage and faith. By the grace of God, it is what we wanted to do in Alabama.

On a basic level, this is true for us and in the gospel, too. Jesus healed the fever, because that's what Simon Peter's mother-in-law suffered with, not a broken leg, or a sore throat. You would not treat asthma with a vitamin or a headache with a Band-aid. Each individual is cared for by Jesus. There were no generalized healings in this narrative, but care for each person with a specific ailment that removed them from their sense of worth, call, dignity, community. The touch of Jesus brought people back into a life of meaning and purpose, creating a greater sense of self in the world.

On Thursday, we visited the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham. In the early 60's it was a thriving, busy church, a gathering place for Afro-Americans to organize, rally and plan for direct action in order to gain civil rights. These sacred spaces were places to get away, to pray, to come together.

On the morning of Sept. 15, 1963, as people met for worship – it was a youth Sunday that day – Klansmen planted a bomb under the steps of the building, resulting in an explosion that took the lives of four girls: Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins, and seriously injuring Sarah Collins Rudolf. The powerful explosion blew out the windows of the building across the street, and in the chaos and confusion, two young boys in Birmingham were killed: Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware, one by another teen, and one by a police officer.

We heard the story from a woman who was part of the church, a small girl at the time, she missed the morning service that day because she was waiting for her father, a farmer, to finish up his work for the morning to bring the family to church. Outrage and horror over this act of cruelty was swift and worldwide.

On our tour of the church, we were led into the sanctuary and saw one of the most memorable and beautiful pieces of art, the stained-glass window of the Black Jesus.

The piece was made by John Petts, a stained-glass artist who lived in Wales. When he read about the tragedy, he offered his services to create and install a replacement window from the people of Wales.

Now Wales is a small country, one that values freedom and independence, and with the help of a newspaper editor, the word went out about this plan, and people were invited to donate small amounts of

The Klansmen who set that bomb were intent on hatred and terror, but the results were the galvanizing of a people, of a nation. Ten months later, President Johnson signed the civil rights act.

Friends, we need the stories of Jesus and his healing, because these are our stories. They are stories of restoration and revitalization, of grace and hope, recognizing and celebrating our humanity. We worship a God who is present in our brokenness and pain, our illness and suffering. A God who desires the flourishing of every human being. A God who is always at work.

So let us pray that we will recognize our story in Christ's greater purpose of healing and hope for ourselves, our earth, and our world.
AMEN.

Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-129-39>

I traveled with Kathy Howell and Rev. Deb DeMeester to Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery Ala. Feb. 1–3, 2024. We visited the 16th Street Baptist Church, the museum and park across the street. We took the trip with the intent to plan a Civil Rights Pilgrimage for the adults and youth of Oak Grove in June of 2024, and with the Synod in November of 2024.

<https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2018/10/the-iconic-wales-window-inside-16th-street-baptist-church/>