

Narrative Lectionary, Jesus' Ministry Begun,

January 5, 2020

I don't know what it's like to be a presidential candidate in Iowa right about now, but it must be an incredibly harried lifestyle. Elizabeth Warren is proud of all the people she takes selfies with. Pete Buttigieg is sitting down at café tables. News reporters want a story. Photographers are snapping pictures. When I read this first chapter of Mark's Gospel that we have for today, I get a sense of the hectic life of Jesus on his first day of ministry. Everybody wants a piece of him.

If a candidate's mission is to show people what their policies will be, Jesus' mission is to show people the reign of God. What does it look like when the values of God's reign are being implemented? What does love act like? What does forgiveness look like? How do you treat an enemy? Remember Jesus had said at the start of his ministry, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!"

So now he is going to show people what the kingdom of looks like and acts like. A coach can talk about her strategy of playing the game all she wants- but it all gets lived out on the basketball court. So, yes, Jesus, like a coach, will write down on a white board what the play looks like, but then Jesus will show people on the court what God's game looks like. When the kingdom of God comes near to you, here is what it looks like.

So in this first chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus goes on a healing spree! A demon is exorcised. A mother-in-law is healed. A leper is cleansed. It would be easy to see these miracles as just isolated one-offs. Here's somebody who needs my help- let me take care of this person. But as we continue in Mark's Gospel, we will notice who he performs miracles for- it's those people who have little power. He'll perform miracles for people who have been excluded from the community. You see, God's got a real problem when people get left out. God is about making the circle wider. So Jesus' strategy is to bring healing to people so they can come back into the community. Jesus wants people back in the game.

Let's look at this first act of healing. On this first day of ministry, he is leading the adult forum in the local synagogue, and people are crowding into the conference

room, and then they have to move to the fellowship hall because people keep showing up to hear. And the people are astounded, because Jesus teaches as someone with authority, which can also be described as power. What he says feels authoritative. It has life. It's a TED talk where you listen and you think, these words could change my life. This person, because of what they have lived and experienced, has something to say that if I applied it, might make a difference. The scribes didn't teach this way. The lessons they taught were all about keeping people excluded. Don't touch these people. Be sure not do anything that will get you in trouble on the Sabbath. Their words felt constricting.

Jesus' words felt freeing; they felt liberating. People were listening to Jesus, and they were saying, His words come with power and authority. His words will bring healing to my life. So while Jesus is teaching, a man in the midst of the assembly, a man with an unclean spirit, starts shouting, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." This man was possessed by a force that wanted to cause destruction, a force that wanted to keep him out of the community. And the spirit in this man knew that this Jesus in the room had liberating power. The spirit in this man felt threatened.

There is another story about a demon-possessed man in chapter 5 who is living in a graveyard, because he couldn't be around people. This alien force was keeping him from the community. I have dealt with demon possession before. We in the Western world think of this as mental illness, but I do believe there are forces in this world opposed to God's will. But even if you are skeptical of that this morning, you know that there are forces that keep us in bondage- and we name those spirits as addiction, or a terrible self-image, or we name this force that keeps us in bondage lust or narcissism or fear. Any power that keeps us from being all that God created us to be is an alien spirit. And God does battle with those forces.

So Jesus looks at this man who is controlled by this alien, destructive spirit, and Jesus says, "Be silent, and come out of him!" The spirit comes out, convulsing the man on the way out, but Jesus wins the battle. Good is stronger than evil; love does conquer hate; this man is restored to wholeness. His own inner being is restored. He can enter the community again. And the people are amazed at the authority that Jesus has.

I worked with a woman in a previous congregation who had multiple personality disorder. She had suffered abuse as a little girl, and in order to cope, her personality had split off into various parts to protect itself. My role was to be her pastor, and to pray for her. She was also seeing a counselor who was a specialist in MPD. Every Tuesday she would come into my office and I would pray over specific instances that had happened to her, picturing Jesus being with her in those times. And she found much healing in her life. I remember seeing her face one Easter morning, with a smile that said, Resurrection is taking place in my life.

If there is emotional pain in your history, and you cannot seem to move on, yes, a counselor can be very helpful. And prayer can be one of the tools for healing. Give me a call and I would be glad to hear the story and to pray for you and with you.

After this incident in the synagogue, Simon says, (and I am reading between the lines)- That was exhausting. Why don't we go over to my mother-in-law's house and get some supper? So when they arrive, they discover that his mother-in-law is down with a fever. They were assuming she was going to make them a fish casserole. And we can be frustrated that Simon wasn't expecting his father-in-law to cook, but this was a patriarchal society. So Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. The fever leaves and she begins to serve them.

I appreciate the nuances of this story. Notice he doesn't heal her fever, and then lift her up. He lifts her up as a sign of faith, and then the fever leaves. I don't know what happens here. There is healing in this world that we cannot explain, and Jesus' ministry is associated with these kinds of miracles. And I would say that what Jesus does here is a model of faith: as we pray, we act as if the answer to prayer is coming. If I desire reconciliation to happen in a relationship, yes, I pray for it. But as I pray, I also reach out to the person, I acknowledge whatever culpability I have, I plant real seeds in the relationship. I am lifting up the relationship as I am praying for the relationship. And sometimes the fever of strife and hurt goes away. We pray, but we also work towards the solution that we believe God wants.

By the way, we could look at this story cynically, and say, Well, Jesus needed supper, so he made sure the hostess was well enough to cook. No, what he does is he restores her to her role of service. In Palestinian culture, it would have been a

huge breach of hospitality for her not to offer them supper, and Jesus enables her to save face.

By the way, notice the phrase, “he took her by the hand and lifted her up.” That Greek phrase “lifted up” is often used in the New Testament to describe the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was “lifted up” from the tomb. In other words, Jesus *resurrected* her. God is always about the job of resurrection- lifting up relationships, lifting up oppressed people, lifting up the downtrodden.

Well, word gets around. Of course it does. And people gather around the house that night, people with alien spirits and ailments of all kinds. And Jesus provides healing for many of them- do you notice that? He cured *many* who were sick. Maybe not everyone was healed.

I don't understand the mysteries of healing. If what Jesus is doing is showing visible manifestations of the reign of God, then that happens in many ways. We see the reign of God in all kinds of ways when it comes to healing. I know God uses medicine and surgery and therapy to help us heal. That's a part of the reign of God. When the suffering continues, but God helps us deal with it, the reign of God is present. When the battle is over, and God helps us cross the finish line of life, that's the reign of God. On this particular day, Jesus cured many who were sick of various diseases.

There are people we call faith healers who say, This is God's will for all of us- miraculous cures that defy the laws of nature. And yet, God typically works in other ways. Miraculous healing is very rare. The former president of the American College of Surgeons wrote a book called *Spontaneous Regression of Cancer*. He cites 176 cases where a miraculous cure seemed to have happened. That's 176 patients out of millions of cases of cancer. Meanwhile, we are told to pray without ceasing, and I will.

We also know that when people pray, machines can record dramatic changes in our bodies in terms of brain waves, and breathing, heart rate and blood chemistry, and all that can have a positive impact on our health. When I practice centering prayer, I know that my body calms down, I feel less stressed. When the conflicts and frustrations of my life come to mind, I place them in God's care. My whole being can rest in God. We also know that a spirit of gratitude can calm the heart. The

body is affected by our thoughts. Our body responds to what our mind is dwelling on.

Well, it's been a breathless first day of Jesus' ministry- starting with casting out an alien force in the morning to bring healing to folks that night. So early in the morning, before anybody else is awake, Jesus leaves the house while it is still dark and goes to a deserted place to pray. What is Jesus praying? Maybe he is praying, Abba, continue to bless the people you restored to health yesterday. Bless those children I saw; bless the marriages. May love blossom and flow in those families.

Perhaps he is praying for strength for this next day of ministry. He is imagining the people he will meet, and picturing the Spirit at work in their lives through him. That's a wonderful way to pray- as you begin your day, picture the encounters you will have, and picture the love of Jesus being present in and through you.

But notice that Jesus, in his hectic life, needs to go away and be by himself and make the time to pray. This is a model for us. We can get so busy; we work, we volunteer, we spend energy on our families. Do we have a spiritual discipline that helps restore us, that tunes us in to God's wavelength? I also believe we can be creative with our disciplines. Prayer can be woven into the tasks of the day. Prayer can be woven into the crafts that we do. Prayer can be the conversation we have with God on the way to and from work. When I am talking with someone, especially if it is a difficult conversation, I am breathing prayer silently and picturing God's presence. Be creative with your prayer life. Jesus finds a way to acknowledge and to be present with the Creator.

Of course, his disciples wake up, and people are already at the door, so when they find him they say, Jesus, everyone is searching for you! Of course they are- they wanted their cousins to be healed! But Jesus says, "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." Jesus knows it is time to move on. How do we know when to move on? Certainly there was more work to do in that town. But Jesus says, Let us go on... We trust that God will still be active in that place even as we need to move on.

Jesus and his disciples move on to the next town, and on the road a leper comes up to Jesus and kneels in front of him, and pleads, "If you choose, you can make me

clean.” Lepers were the outcasts of society. Leviticus spends a lot of ink describing various kinds of skin ailments, and how lepers need to behave. Here is a sample—“The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

If you had leprosy, you had to leave the community. If you had leprosy, you were isolated. If you had leprosy, you lost your family and your friends. You were untouchable. So this man kneels in front of Jesus and says, If you choose, you can make me clean. Mark says, Jesus is moved with pity. The Greek word here is sometimes pity, but in other texts, the word is indignation. I vote for both. Yes, Jesus is compassionate towards the person. We are called to be compassionate when we meet suffering people. But indignant is something different. Being indignant is anger at the reasons why the person is this way. Maybe it is being angry at societal conditions. Being indignant is about the source of someone’s misery. God calls us to be compassionate with people, and indignant about conditions in our world that cause people suffering, and to let that motivate us to action. Jesus is compassionate towards the man, but he is indignant that he is spending his life in isolation, because remember, God wants to bring us into community.

Remember this man is untouchable. So what does Jesus do? He breaks the taboo—he touches him. And instead of Jesus becoming unclean, this man is cleansed of his leprosy, and he is able to move back into community.

In the latest issue of *Living Lutheran*, filmmaker and activist and Lutheran professor Shannon Ivey talks about writing a script about foster children for a television pilot called *Region 8*. She says this: “Writing the script nearly broke me. To properly write *Region 8*, I interviewed foster children, biological families, foster/adoptive families, legislators, Child Protection Services workers, judges, abusers, human traffickers, and victims. I lost faith in people for quite some time. It took the victory of finally adopting our own two children out of the system to restore my faith and remind me that good *always* prevails. It has to.”

Notice that when she has to deal with all the stories of hurt and suffering it nearly breaks her. But her faith is also restored when she reaches *into* that system and changes the lives of two little ones. Jesus reaches out to touch the leper, and because he gives away his power, that man who had been rejected is brought into community. The system is changed. Healing happens as he reaches in.

I invite you to pray with me. God, in a world of suffering and exclusion, you ask us to reach out across boundaries; you ask us to include those who've been excluded. Strengthen and heal us, so that we can be ministers of healing in your world. In the name of our Compassionate Healer, Jesus the Christ. Amen.