

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 40:21-31  
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:29-39  
February 7, 2021

### ***“God Has a Plan and It’s Not Ours”***

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Things happen fast in Mark’s gospel. This event seems to have taken place right after Jesus’ encounter with the demon possessed man we talked about last week. In fact, there is both archaeological remains and tradition that indicate that Simon Peter’s home may have been right next door to the synagogue. Regardless, Mark once more uses his favorite word “immediately”, which our translation has paraphrased into “as soon as”. For our purposes what we need to know is that it was still the Sabbath, and no one was supposed to work on the Sabbath. Healing was often construed as work by the Pharisees, and Jesus was often accused of healing on the Sabbath.

This was the home of Simon and Andrew, two adult brothers. As was normal at the time it was also the home of an extended family. The nuclear family unit is a relatively recent phenomena. Peter’s wife’s mother lived with them, probably because her husband had died and she either didn’t have sons or they were too young to support her. Once there they discovered that Peter’s mother-in-law was ill in bed with a fever. Fever was serious business. There were no antibiotics. They didn’t even have aspirin. People died of fevers or the infections that caused them all the time. This was not a small matter, and Jesus was told about it immediately. What happened next is summed up in two short sentences with a lot of loaded content. We just don’t happen to realize anything is unusual because we’re American. Mark’s gospel tells us that Jesus, “went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.”

The first odd thing about this story is that Jesus touched the woman. He took her by the hand. This was very unorthodox. Men did not touch women in this culture unless they were family members. Touching sick people was also not done. But Jesus touched people all the time when he healed them. Jesus even touched lepers, an act that would render him unclean. Even now in our culture most of us unconsciously refrain from touching people who are ill. We are afraid of contagion. And because we’re in the middle of a pandemic we are on high alert. Not only do we not touch someone running a fever, we cover ourselves with protective clothing and stay far away! Nurses and doctors touch those who are sick. A parent might take on the risk of becoming ill to touch and comfort a sick child. But we don’t just touch a complete stranger running a raging fever. Jesus crossed over two barriers at the same time—gender, and sickness.

Secondly, Jesus did this on the Sabbath. We will hear all about this type of violation in other stories. And finally, the Sabbath continued to be broken when the woman was healed, got up and started serving her guests!

A lot of people today, especially women, get very annoyed by the fact that Peter's mother-in-law gets up and starts serving the men as soon as she is healed, as if their comfort is what matters. But those people do not know my mother, at least not like I know my mother. One of the things that frustrates and aggravates my mother the most is the fact that at 91 with poor balance she can't just jump out of her chair, prepare large meals and serve people food. She can't just run out to the store. She can't clean the house the way she used to. She even tries to sneak up onto the third floor on her hands and knees so she can check that we made the beds properly up there! We practically had to physically restrain her from going down the treacherous basement steps to check on the Christmas decorations. If you were to ask my mother what she would want most in the world right now, it would be the physical ability to do all the things she used to do. And that would certainly have been the case with this woman. Serving was her joy, and Jesus restored it to her. He raised her up. When God heals us we are healed back into life. Everyone needs purpose in life. We may think we want an endless vacation, but in fact we would soon find that kind of life depressing, even if it is largely unavoidable with old age.

That evening when the sun had set, according to Jewish understanding it was the next day and no longer the Sabbath. At that point people came streaming out bringing all of their sick and those possessed by demons. As I said last week, that with regard to "demons" we could be talking about spiritual evil, but we could also be looking at epilepsy, autism and mental illness. People did make the distinction between physical illness and behavioral illness, but they didn't understand it.

The next morning Jesus rose very early before dawn while it was still dark. He found a solitary place to go and pray. Jesus always covered everything in prayer, seeking guidance for each step along the way. In the incarnation Jesus emptied himself of all divine power. He knew more than the disciples, but he didn't know everything. He had to consciously pray to connect with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. But Simon Peter and the others were not on the same wavelength. They were still excited by the events of the night before. Jesus was a miracle worker and he was staying in their house! They came to him with a subtle rebuke, telling him that everyone was looking for him. They may have already started thinking about setting up Capernaum as a base of operations. They probably were considering what Jesus would do later that day or evening. But before they could get ahead of themselves Jesus stopped them in their tracks, saying, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." They couldn't control Jesus. They couldn't set the agenda. God had a plan, and it wasn't theirs.

The unfortunate human response to a divine encounter is often, let's set up an institution! This is awesome, we say. Let's replicate it. Let's use it. A church does a special outreach event and it is incredibly successful. Twenty years later they are still putting on the same event in the same way but WITHOUT the same results. The Spirit moved on. The people didn't. We can manipulate people enough to bring about an emotional response. Some mega churches are very good at that. But we cannot produce the Holy Spirit. God has the power to heal, but we can't control God. Not everyone was healed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the same is true today. We want to make it a guaranteed

formula. If x then y. If I do this then God will do that. But it never works that way. God has purposes we don't understand. God has the power to evict evil, but we also know that some people keep choosing evil. Only God can work from the inside out, and God respects human autonomy, whether we like it or not.

The psalmist says that God "gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." God is the source of our strength and the source of our healing, but God's power is for God's plan not ours. God is always on the move, and sometimes we have to catch up.

Where will God lead us next? Last year at this time who knew we would be doing services and meetings on something called Zoom? Most of us didn't even know what Zoom was. We had no idea we were facing a deadly pandemic. But God knew. God did not desire that so many thousands of people would die, but God knew. And God has plans for us, as individuals and as a faith community, plans for today, and plans for tomorrow. As we draw nearer to the time when we will be able to worship together again in person, and as we struggle to get everyone vaccinated and stay one step ahead of the virus before it mutates again, it's time for us to pray as Jesus prayed, and to find out what direction the Spirit wants us to go next. God's plans are always bigger than our plans, wider than our plans, more spiritually challenging than our plans, and far more redemptive than our plans. We're tired right now. It's February. The vaccine rollout is taking ridiculously long. We're just putting one foot in front of the other. But Spring is coming, and God our healer and redeemer is on the move. Amen.

Isaiah 40:21-31

<sup>21</sup> Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

<sup>22</sup> He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

<sup>23</sup> He brings princes to naught  
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

<sup>24</sup> No sooner are they planted,  
no sooner are they sown,  
no sooner do they take root in the ground,  
than he blows on them and they wither,  
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

"To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:

Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one

and calls forth each of them by name.  
Because of his great power and mighty strength,  
not one of them is missing.

<sup>27</sup> Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the Lord;  
my cause is disregarded by my God”?

<sup>28</sup> Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.

<sup>29</sup> He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

<sup>30</sup> Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;

<sup>31</sup> but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.

Mark 1:29-39

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.<sup>30</sup> Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. <sup>31</sup> So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered at the door, <sup>34</sup> and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

<sup>35</sup> Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and his companions went to look for him, <sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

<sup>38</sup> Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” <sup>39</sup> So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.