

SERMON SUPPLEMENTAL

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 31, 2021

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++KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK++

WE ARE LIFTED UP FOR WORSHIP AND SERVICE

This Week's Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28



READINGS IN A NUTSHELL

On the Sundays after Epiphany and the Sundays after Pentecost this year, we repeatedly encounter the paradox set out by Mark: Jesus, although hidden from many, is revealed as Christ to believers. This Sunday those who recognize Jesus and receive his power are assembled in a house, as were the first hearers of Mark's gospel. We too arise from our sickbed to serve others, proclaiming the kingdom and sharing holy communion.

In this week's gospel reading, we read of Jesus meeting with his disciples, and he escapes alone to pray. He heals, and he hides. He displays power, and he orders demons to keep silent. Mark's account of the meaning of Jesus' ministry alternates between his being hidden in the crucifixion and being acclaimed risen within the believing community. Like Peter's mother-in-law, we have been raised from illness and now serve one another.

The Old Testament reading is a poem from Isaiah 40. It is chosen to exemplify the power of the LORD God to bring hope and life out of despair and death. We too are faint and powerless, and we have gathered to be raised from our sickbeds to serve one another. The Old Testament reading both articulates the human hope for salvation and prepares us to receive today's gospel proclamation.

Then, in 1st Corinthians, we are called to share Paul's paradoxical understanding of life under the gospel. We are free, in order to submit ourselves to others. In Luther's words, Christians are both perfectly free, subject to none, and dutiful servants, subject to all. Like Peter's mother-in-law, we arise from ourselves to be a slave to all.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Mark 1:21-39 sets up the framework of Jesus' ministry in terms of casting out demons, healing, and preaching/teaching. We already saw his first exorcism in verses 21-28. Now we encounter his first healing.

Back from the synagogue, a public place for men, Jesus goes into a house, a private place for women. It belongs to Simon and Andrew, the two brothers who were the first recruits in Mark 1:16-18. He comes with a male entourage that includes two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John, and is told that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. She is not named, which shows that she was an ordinary woman. Only women deemed important by the Gospel writer are mentioned by name in Mark (see Mark 6:17-29; 15:40; 16:1).

Jesus comes into the house and finds the sick woman. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up (see Mark 5:41). Apparently she is healed right away because she begins to serve them. The word for serving is *diakoneo*, which denotes not only providing them with food, but also service in general as women did in those days as part of Mediterranean hospitality.

The fact that the first person to be healed in the story is a

woman is significant. It shows that from the very beginning Jesus sided with the least of society. But he was a first century Jew and could not escape the mores of his culture. He still expected women to serve him and his group of followers (Mark 15:41), as seen in this case. We should be careful not to make universal laws concerning the role of contemporary women and men based on passages such as this.

The positive message of this healing, and the other cures in Mark 1, is that they represent Jesus' ideology of inclusion: those healed are incorporated back into society. Simon's mother-in-law returns to her role as a woman in the society of the time (verse 31) and the leper is told to fulfill his responsibilities as a member of the covenant people (verse 44).

"That evening, at sunset," in verse 32 has caused scholars of previous generations to accuse Mark of being redundant, and to doubt the role of the evangelist as an author in his own right, relegating him to the role of a mere collector of traditions. That is not the case anymore. Nowadays the majority of biblical scholars think that Mark was the first written gospel and that Matthew and Luke relied on him for most of their information. Therefore, this verse can be

explained by saying that the people, by bringing the sick and the possessed at sunset—which marked the beginning of a new day—were respecting the Sabbath sacredness.

As an expert storyteller, Mark makes use of many literary devices, among them hyperboles, as in verse 33: “The whole city was gathered around the door.” But when it comes to Jesus’ ministry, he is more measured and gives a more realistic picture. He says that Jesus cured “many,” not all, as in Matthew 8:16 and Luke 4:40, who obviously had a more exalted view of Jesus than Mark.

Again Jesus does not allow the demons to speak. First, as in 1:25, he does not want them to have power over him. Second, he was afraid that an early recognition of his messiahship would compromise his ministry. He avoided the enticement to popularity, verbalized by Satan in the other versions of the temptation story recorded in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13, and here by his minions.

Early in the morning, Jesus leaves the house of Simon and Andrew and withdraws to a deserted place to pray. In Mark, Jesus prays three times: here, in 6:41, and in 14:32-42. Prayer is part of Jesus’ profound spirituality and seems to point to moments of crisis in his ministry. When Simon and his companions finally find him (the Greek verb *katadioko* suggests an intense search), alleging that everyone is looking for him, he tells them that they need to move on to the surrounding towns

in order to proclaim the message there too, and to continue his ministry of liberation.

Contextualizing the text

This text offers several considerations for our time:

- We need to avoid the allure of popularity, the celebrity syndrome engraved so deeply in the U.S. culture as exemplified by the widespread use of social media. Jesus could have stayed in Capernaum and become a local hero, using people’s problems for the purpose of self-aggrandizing. But he decided to move on.
- We should accept our limitations. Even Jesus could not heal everybody.
- We need to find our “deserted place” in order to re-energize and charge our spiritual batteries. It is a vital part of our ministry and a good antidote for the cult of personality.

We need to focus our ministry on those who will not be able to repay us. We should avoid the danger of using their needs as a way of self-aggrandizing. God’s preferential option for the poor is written all over the New Testament and our challenge is how to preach it without using it as a justification for our personal agendas.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Exactly like his hero Carl Sagan, Neil deGrasse Tyson spearheaded his own (first of two) science-popularizing TV series: *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014). The series shares the mighty deeds of people like Giordano Bruno, who probed “above the circle of the earth” (Isa. 40:22), leading him to preach that there were other planets besides the earth. Or twentieth-century geochemist Clair Patterson, who, “[mounting] up with wings like eagles” (40:31), defied the all-powerful petrochemical industry and initiated efforts that ultimately led to a global ban on poisonous lead additives.

Our psalm today aligns yet more closely with both Tyson’s and Sagan’s *Cosmos* series—series that revel in “the number of the stars” (Ps. 147:4) and how animals get their food (v. 9), as well as share tales of how the indomitable human spirit sees that “the wicked [are cast] to the ground” (v. 6) and the brokenhearted are healed (v. 3). And yes, though Tyson and Sagan may speak of these things as nonreligious phenomena,

what would happen if we understood these stories not as evidence *that* God does wonderous deeds but also of *how* God does wonderous deeds? That’s food for thought.

In the second episode of *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, in a fascinating exploration of evolution and genetics called “Some of the Things Molecules Do,” series narrator Neil DeGrasse Tyson shares a truly breathtaking bit of data. Reviewing the genetic formulae of the few living creatures who have had their full genome deciphered, he points out how the genetic code for processing sugar into energy among all of these living things—insects, animals, and fungi—is *exactly* the same. This fact, then, does more than give strong proof that all life has a common, primeval ancestor. It is a tangible, scientifically verifiable proof that all life is interconnected. “Accepting our kinship with all life on Earth is not only solid science,” he concludes. “In my view, it’s also a soaring spiritual experience.” How could you use this in conversation with skeptics of evolution or skeptics of religious faith/Christianity?



AROUND THE TABLE

In Isaiah the one God who sits above the earth and numbers the stars also strengthens the powerless. So in Jesus’ healing work we see the hand of the creator God, lifting up the sick woman to health and service (*diakonia*). Like Simon’s mother-in-law, we are lifted up and healed to serve. Following Jesus, we strengthen the powerless; like Jesus, we seek to renew our own strength in quiet times of prayer.

1. When did you recently experience God’s grace and mercy? (Ps 111:4)
2. How have you shared or experienced love that builds up? (1 Cor 8:1)
3. How does Jesus’ divine authority help us reflect on the nature of today’s political authority? (Mark 1:22, 27)
4. Paul speaks of sovereign freedom (1 Cor 8:9), similar to Jesus’ authority to serve humanity. How can we do likewise?