

Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 4, 2018

Healing and Preaching in Galilee

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson for this Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Isaiah the prophet builds on an assumption that underlies Israel's praise—the assumption that faith begins with memory. But many things can threaten the memory of the community of faith. Listen to these words from Isaiah 40:21-31...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson reveals Jesus and his company being plunged into the midst of human need. Jesus heals many, but recognizes his need to be alone in prayer. Jesus has come not only to heal but to preach the gospel, not just in Capernaum, but in neighboring towns as well. Listen to these words from Mark 1:29-39...

Sermon

Some of us can remember when doctors made house calls. Up until about fifty years ago, it was not unusual. I suppose it's an unsustainable business model today. The doctor carried that little black bag with the stethoscope tucked inside. They'd take your temperature, listen to your heart and lungs, and offer a word of encouragement—"Yes, there's a lot of this going around." It was a relief knowing we didn't have polio, tuberculosis, or small pox. Remember Marcus Welby, played by Robert Young—he knew many of his patients by their first name and wasn't above making house calls.

I can remember when I was seven years old, in the second grade, I came down with chicken pox, which went into scarlet fever, and then encephalitis. Needless to say, I was a very sick boy. I recall the doctor coming to our home to give me shots with this long needle. I was out for school for several weeks, but thankfully, recovered.

In our Gospel Lesson today from Mark 1, we first encounter Jesus making a house call. Having just left the synagogue, he goes to the nearby home of Simon Peter and Andrew, Jesus' close disciples. Peter's mother-in-law is in bed, sick with a fever. So Jesus comes and takes her by the hand and lifts her up. The fever leaves and she begins to serve them.

Then in verse 34 we read of the whole city being gathered around the door and Jesus curing many who were sick with various diseases, and casting out many demons. The idea of demons, or evil spirits, was common in the New Testament. And various interpretations have been offered—such as an explanation for mental illness or a condition like epilepsy. But the important point is that Jesus healed people of all sorts of afflictions. He healed lepers, the blind, and The Gerasene Demoniac. He healed a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, and a man who was deaf.

Also we read of Jesus not permitting the demons to speak. This is an example of Mark's "Messianic Secret," which declares that no complete understanding of Jesus is possible except in the light of his passion, death, and resurrection. (Lamar Williamson in his *Interpretation Commentary on Mark*, p. 13) As Fred Craddock said,

The confession of only one person who takes up the cross to follow Jesus means more than the compliments of one thousand pushing and shoving in Galilee." (*Preaching Through the Christian Year*, p. 97)

The gospels proclaim the power of Jesus to heal all sorts of fevers. Preaching on this text in Bethlehem about 400 A.D. Jerome said:

O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers. But let us ask the apostles to call upon Jesus to come to us and touch our hand; for if he touches our hand, at once the fever flees. (*Corpus Christianorum*, LXXVIII, 468)

The mother-in-laws healing by Jesus' touch of her hand reminds me of the gospel song that we will sing shortly by William Gaither, "He Touched Me":

Shackled by a heavy burden,
'Neath a load of guilt and shame.
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
And now I am no longer the same.

He touched me, Oh He touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole. (v. 1)

Many times at a graveside service I have prayed the familiar Prayer for Holy Rest:

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in thy mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1946)

When Peter's mother-in-law is healed by the touch of the Carpenter's hands, she immediately begins to serve Jesus and his companions. Discipleship is about serving Jesus Christ and others. Then her service gives way to Jesus' service to the people of Capernaum. For that very evening afflicted people from all over the city were brought to him to experience his healing touch.

Throughout scripture we find one incident after another of the power of touch. Way back in Genesis we read of the angel who touched Jacob's hip socket which subsequently led to a new name (Israel) and blessing for Jacob. (Gen. 32:24-28) Later in Mark we read of the healing of Jarius's 12-year-old daughter when she was thought to have died. Jesus took her by the hand and

said, “Little girl, arise.” And she rose up and walked. (Mk. 5:41-42) In fact it was on the way to Jarius’ home that a woman with a blood malady that had lasted for twelve years, and for which she had suffered under many physicians and spent all that she had, came up behind Jesus in a crowd and touched the hem of his garment and was healed. (Mk. 5:25-34)

Science has shown that infants who are deprived of touch at an early age experience devastating effects on developmental skills and sociability. Loving care needs to be expressed, felt. In Jesus Christ the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The healing love of God reached out to touch human beings. Those on our Parish Care Team seek to reflect that love when we reach out to touch someone—through a hand on the shoulder, a visit with a meal, a card in the mail, a phone call to say, “Hello, how are you?”

Next we find Jesus withdrawing to a lonely, deserted place to pray. Our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah reminds us that,

Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (40:30-31)

When Jesus withdrew to that lonely place, it was in the early morning while it was still dark. In times of stress, temptation, and decision, Jesus turns to God for strength and guidance.

Reminding us to “drawn near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need.” (Heb. 4:16)

Perhaps here in Mark 1 Jesus is tempted to return with Simon and the others to know the favor of the crowd in working miracles. “Everyone is searching for you.” And his disciples see no reason to break off a popular tour with retreat and prayer.

Which opens the way to the second theme of our lesson. Not only was Jesus a healer, but also he was a preacher. His answer to the disciples' request:

“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.” (Mk. 1:38)

We hear an echo of these words in Paul's “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 1:16) Jesus will subordinate his ability for healing and exorcism to do what he came out to do: proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is his primary task. And such proclamation is the context in which healing gains its true meaning.

In her book *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor says:

No other modern public speaker does what the preacher tries to do. The trial attorney has glossy photographs and bagged evidence to hand around; the teacher has blackboards and overhead projectors; the politician has brass bands and media consultants. All the preacher has is words.

Yes, but those words faithfully reflective of scripture and blessed by the Holy Spirit, can transform our lives.

Through preaching Jesus sought to reach the sin-sick soul. It is not just the sick human body that Jesus seeks to heal, but also the lost soul that he seeks to restore and make whole. Jesus does not see us as a separate body and soul, but as a whole person for whom he is willing to die.

Jesus wants to proclaim the good news of God's saving love and truth—the “good news of great joy.” He wants to bring people into a saving relationship with God. He wants everyone to hear the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. And he will not be constricted to one local nor confined to the expectation of anxious disciples.

“And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Not just the city of Capernaum, but the whole region of Galilee will now experience the power of Jesus in word and deed. And Galileans who had only heard of him secondhand, will now know the miracle of his healing presence. But Jesus won’t go alone: “Let us go to the neighboring towns.” His disciples are to go with him. And today, by the power of the Holy Spirit, his disciples continue his ministry of healing and proclamation.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.