

Sermon for Epiphany 5, year B
February 4th, 2018
The Rev. Joan E. Fleming

Readings:

Isaiah 40:21-31

I Corinthians 9: 16-23

Mark 1: 29-39

The Gospel reading from Mark this morning is brief, yet it raises several themes in its short span for us to ponder. We will separate out three of them.

Our **first theme** is Mark's introduction of one of the enduring puzzles of the New Testament, a puzzle that was labeled a little over a century ago as the "Messianic secret." It was Wilhelm Wrede who first pointed out the curious paradox (in Mark's gospel particularly) of Jesus' frequently hushing up anyone— "demons" especially—who started going public with the idea that here was the long awaited Messiah. Mark himself opens his gospel with an unequivocal proclamation, though: he is definitely going public in a big way, identifying Jesus from the start, and introducing him with a flourish, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God."

There is a curious discrepancy between the two different emphases in Mark's gospel, most noticeable in one particular passage, the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, in chapter 5. Jesus is trailed by a large crowd as he heads for the home of Jairus; the crowd are all eager to see a miracle, yet when Jesus emerges from the house, having indeed raised the little girl who had been reported dead, "he strictly ordered them that no one should know this." But can we doubt that the news was leaked within minutes?

None of the scholarly hypotheses as to why Mark presents Jesus' ministry as "a constant paradox of secrecy and revelation, of concealment and proclamation" seems entirely satisfactory, though perhaps the most convincing is that Mark is trying to reconcile the oral tradition that has come down to him concerning Jesus the man who walked the earth and captivated so many ordinary folk, with the resurrected Christ that he and other "Jesus believers" (like ourselves) know and worship as God Incarnate.

For it was only after the crucifixion and resurrection that Jesus came to be understood, certainly according to Paul, as the only Son of God. In his letter to the Romans (1: 1-4), Paul describes himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and "the gospel of God ... concerning his Son, ... descended from David according to the flesh and ... declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord ..."

According to this hypothesis, Mark sets out to describe the earthly ministry of Jesus, the man, but his knowledge of and allegiance to Jesus, the Christ, crucified and risen, keeps pushing its way into his narrative ... in the intrusive taunts of “demons” like the one whom we met in last week’s gospel, for example, who shouted out, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God,” only to be sharply rebuked by Jesus, as today’s passage tells us he did repeatedly with demons, “because they knew him.” At this stage in Jesus’ ministry, Mark seems to be saying, his true identity was not to be a matter for speculation or discussion.

Those demons may pose us a problem too, though of a different kind. Now we move on to our **second theme** for scrutiny, that of ancient versus modern medical understanding. We have of course made giant strides over the course of the intervening two thousand years, most of them in only the last century, in our understanding of human physiology, and the causes of sickness and health in both body and mind. In the ancient world, “demons” or evil spirits were believed to be responsible for congenital conditions, certainly, but for just about every other affliction as well. The important thing was that these malevolent agents of disease were seen as *outside* agents, operating from outside of the person afflicted, striking down the individual, most likely as punishment for sins, known or unknown; but whatever the underlying “cause,” individual calamities appeared random, the work of mysterious and evil forces not normally subject to human intervention. It was because Jesus *was* able to tame them, that he was inevitably seen as “having authority”, even as “superhuman.”

But Jesus’ powers of healing were also mysterious, deriving equally from “outside” the sufferer, although, for the crowds who flocked to him, they were clearly generated by a mighty force for good that could be none other than God himself.

In the absence of any accurate knowledge of the human brain or proof of the constant traffic between our brains and our bodies, or of how mind, body and spirit interact, people naturally turned to *negative* “principalities and powers” to account for human ills, and to *positive* ones to account for the blessing of human health restored. Theirs was, to say the least, a very narrow repertoire of medical cause and effect.

In today’s world, of course, the repertoire has been enormously expanded, growing ever more nuanced and technically effective. At one end of the spectrum we have Oliver Sacks the brilliant neurologist, best known for his mischievous title, *The Man who mistook his Wife for a Hat*, who never ceased to marvel at the astonishing intricacy and variety of the human species. He brought to the study of neuroscience the same sense of humility and awe that we heard in the words of Isaiah: “Have you not seen? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth ... his understanding is unsearchable.”

At the other end of the spectrum though, let us not forget, less than a hundred years ago in Soviet Russia, a stultifying ban—a total shut-down—was imposed on the academic disciplines of Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology, which effectively narrowed the field of insight into mental illness almost as much as it had been restricted, simply on account of ignorance, in biblical times. The new Soviet man, *homo Sovieticus*, was to be a strict materialist and his conduct was to be “interpreted” only and exclusively as *behaviorist* [think Pavlov’s dog]. Communism was in the business of killing the soul and denying God, and to this end, curiosity about the human species and whole fields of inquiry into human behavior must be shut down. Masha Gessen’s new book, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism reclaimed Russia* is a chilling study of how totalitarianism is again on the rise in the Russia of today.

We close with our **third theme**, though in narrative sequence, I suppose it should have been the first: Jesus’ healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law.

Jesus and his friends are returning from the synagogue, no doubt ready for what in our terms would be a nice Sunday lunch prepared by the woman of the house, who had stayed home during worship in order to prepare everything. But instead of being greeted with a good hot meal they find their hostess in bed running a high fever. Jesus was undoubtedly tired from teaching and preaching all morning, but, “he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.” But it is my own reaction to the next sentence in the account that I find challenging: “Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

Pause for station identification!

Would all the women in the congregation who heard their inner feminist whisper even ever so quietly, “*Typical!*” when they heard that sentence, please raise your hands ... Thank you for your honesty. ...

Even if you were among those who did raise their hands, I suspect you realized how inappropriate that little “feminist” reaction was, how anachronistic.

Nevertheless, I think this exercise demonstrates just how very difficult it is for us to suppress completely those responses to the Biblical text that only a moment’s reflection tells us derive from our *own* cultural context and moment in time. Knee-jerk responses confront and challenge us every day, after all, and we are no doubt often guilty of them ourselves, particularly in these politically polarized times.

Mark tells us that Simon’s mother-in-law immediately set to work to make the company welcome as soon as her fever was down. He is *not* showing us a woman resuming her stereotypical role. He is *not* showing us a bunch of boorish males who expect any able-bodied woman to be up on her feet preparing food to serve *them*. Rather, Mark is showing us Jesus’ compassionate power to heal.

And that power continues to this day. Let us rejoice in it, meditate upon it, trust in it, and invite it into our own lives.

*Drop thy still dews of quietness 'til all our strivings cease,
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace, the beauty of thy peace. Amen*