

Restore us, O GOD; let Your face shine, that we may be healed!
Mark 1.29-39

In the teaching last Sunday, we noted that Mark's story of Jesus is told in movements. That the repeating patterns of the rapidly changing scenes and stories serve to create a larger story. Or perhaps another way of saying it is that the repeating patterns and variety of stories are all moving toward the One Story, the Good News of healing and resurrection, of life and aliveness that Jesus proclaimed and lived and offers us.

The scene last Sunday took place on the Sabbath in the synagogue. And we noted that while the calling out of the unclean spirit was at the center of the story, all around the story is a critique of the scribes, of the diseased system that governed the synagogue and temple. This conflict between Jesus and the scribes will permeate Mark's Gospel.

I repeat this so that we remember the scene, because it informs how we hear and understand today's scenes.

It is still Sabbath when Jesus goes with his four disciples to Simon Peter's house. It is still sacred time, but Jesus is moving from the public space of the synagogue to the private space of someone's home, moving from a holy place to an ordinary place.

And in this place, there is also a healing. But it's a different kind of healing. In the synagogue story, Mark tells us nothing about the man who was inhabited by the spirit. Which makes sense, because the story isn't about the man, but about the diseased social system. But in the private space of his disciples' home, it was Peter's mother-in-law who was sick. A family member. In the synagogue the healing was social, the communal body; here in the home it's personal, a single body.

Notice the words that Mark uses to describe what happens. This woman is in bed with a fever, something they tell Jesus immediately. And he responds by grabbing her hand and

raising her up. And the fever released her. And she began to serve them. She was raised up. The fever let go of her. And she began to minister. (We'll come back to this.)

The story resumes at sundown. It resumes when Sabbath is ended. And as ordinary time begins, the city begins carrying their sick to the door of the home where Jesus is staying. Take a moment to see this in your mind's eye. In the morning when it was Sabbath, there was a gathering of bodies in the synagogue. Do you see that gathering? And now look at the gathering at the door of Simon Peter's home. In the morning, people *walked* to the synagogue. And in the evening, people are being carried to the door of Peter's home. In the "clean" synagogue, the bodies that gathered *appeared* to be healthy and strong, persons who belonged, who were included in social circles. At this door the bodies are obviously sick, possessed, the outcasts and the misfits, persons excluded from participation in social settings, or holy rituals. The gathering in the morning was a selective gathering, one you had to qualify for, or prove your right to be there. But in the evening, every body gathered. Any body.

In the synagogue, Jesus was teacher, an astounding teacher, a threatening presence. And here, in the evening is Jesus the healer, a welcome presence. We don't know what kind of interaction Jesus had with the gathering that evening. What Mark does tell us is that many were healed of whatever diseased them; and many spirits were cast out. Whatever Jesus' engagement with this gathering, something profound happened. The gathering experienced healing that changed them, that transformed them.

My sense is that for many of us as we've heard this story through our lives, or even now as we hear it, this healing is the climax of the story. These healings are the point of the story. But they aren't.

If we focus on miraculous healings, we miss other, more important parts of this story.

It might be helpful to make some distinctions here. In our context, over the past generations (or centuries?), this story easily gets reduced to diseases being miraculously cured. This becomes a story about medical and biological conditions being inexplicably cured, if not magically, disappeared. And that's the end of the story. The good news of the story is that somebody was sick and Jesus made their bodies well.

Telling this story might work for children, but it doesn't work for adults. Once we're old enough to experience life, this interpretation is superficial. And false. It's great for people who were sick and are now better. But what about Miriam? And Penny? Or Wendell's sister? What about all the people we know who are sick or in pain with real bio-medical conditions. This story can become a burden for people who pray to be made well, yet never find relief.

So what might a more true, a more nuanced interpretation of this story look like?

A first possibility is for us to see and hear this story beyond the biological and medical curing of illness and diseases. In the time of Jesus, there weren't the distinctions that we have about what is biology and medical and physical and what is spiritual and emotional. And in our context, we are super fixated on separating these and we place a lot of trust in medicine and medicine's capacity to make diseases go away. As a society we relate to our bodies like cars, assuming that because we understand the machinery, we can—and we should—fix our pieces and parts that have gone bad.

But our bodies aren't machinery. We are human *beings*, bodied spirits. Our physicality cannot be separated from our spirituality; our physical health is inseparable from our social and emotional health. They're completely and exquisitely integrated.

In other words, the healing in this story is more than simply making diseases go away. The whole body that gathered at the door of the home where Jesus was staying was suffering from the diseased social systems they were part of. The years of oppression under Roman

occupation, the injustices, the poverty, the cruelty of exclusion from their own cultural and religious establishments. The wounds from living under such conditions, year after year, generation after generation...these are the wounds, the pain, the suffering that came to the door that evening after the sun set.

But the healing—even a more complicated understanding of disease and healing—the healing still isn't the end of the story.

If this were the end of the story, we'd be left with a single view of Jesus as healer, that healing people is his purpose.

But it isn't.

There are a lot of details that Mark leaves out of his stories, but the reason for Jesus coming wasn't one of them.

The story continues. After the many were healed, before the sun came up, while it was still dark, Jesus went to a wilderness place. Alone.

If we step back to look at the movements in Mark's stories, we see that Jesus has been in this wilderness place before, right after his baptism when the Spirit took him there to be tested. And from that solitary place, he entered public and private spaces, engaging with individuals and systems. Since proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God, this is the first time he withdraws to be alone.

The story continues. The disciples come looking for him and we know before they say anything what they want. The town is waking up and they want Jesus. Of course they do! They had an amazing and transforming evening with him. Of course they want to be with him again. Of course they have more diseases, more wounds, more sins to bring to him. But Jesus answers, "Let's go somewhere else, to another town so I can preach there, because that's what I came to do."

Jesus came to preach, to proclaim the Good News of God. Jesus came as the Word of God. His purpose was to deliver the Word of God. As the Word of God, sometimes he was teacher, sometimes healer, sometimes exorcist. And sometimes, alone.

We want to understand who Jesus was and what Jesus did so that we know how to follow him. And too often we unintentionally end up limiting or simplifying the Word that Jesus preached. But what's fascinating is that Mark doesn't tell us the content of Jesus preaching, or his teaching. He tells us stories. Stories about what happened. And every story is different because every town and every encounter was different. And each person who tells the story of their encounter with Jesus will tell a different story. So we live with these stories, multiple stories, sometimes conflicting stories.

But what all the stories have in common is that encounters with Jesus, with the Word of God, leave people restored, healed, forgiven. Jesus healed people *for* life, *for* living. The Word that Jesus proclaimed gave people their lives back. Encounters with Jesus restored agency to victims, well-being to invalids, and release to those possessed. Peter's mother-in-law was confined by her illness. Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of God raised her up! It grabbed her, pulled her up and put her back on her feet. Resurrected to life!

And she began to serve, to be a deacon. (The first deacon was a woman!) Her service to those around her was the same service that Jesus received from the angels when he was in the wilderness being tested. And it's the same service as when he says later in Mark's story that the Son of Humanity came, not to be served, but to serve.

Our experiences sometimes lead us to think that serving is burdensome, that because Peter's mother-in-law got up and served, and because Jesus served, that we *need* to serve, and keep serving.

But these stories of Jesus suggest otherwise. As Mark tells us these stories about Jesus being served and serving others, there's a sense that service is a manifestation of healing, of life, of aliveness. Serving is a symptom of the contagion of life and aliveness in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus didn't serve out of a sense of obligation; rather serving was an outcome, or an expression of his sense of being loved and beloved of God. When the whole town was asking for him, he was utterly free to say, "Let's go to another town."

And that's what makes the wilderness and solitude so essential. As we hear the Jesus story, it becomes clear that the time apart was necessary for his own healing. In solitude with his Abba God, he could hear God's words, "You are my beloved son." With that secure identity, his joy is full, and he can't help but proclaim God's love to others.

May we find wilderness spaces where, alone with our Abba God, our identity as God's beloved can be restored. And may the healing we experience in that solitude, fill us with such joy that we are utterly free...and contagious!