

Gospel - Mark 1: 29-39

Epiphany 5

Sermon 2.7.21

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“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. 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.”

Whenever my mom reached the end of her rope and raised her voice with words like, “I’ve about had it” (or “I’ve about had it with you” or “I’ve about had it up to here”), then I knew that certain doom lay ahead. There was going to be disruption. Things were going to change. There would be disturbing emotions. There would be hell to pay, so to speak.

Sometimes love in action appears in a form like that of violence or strong vehemence at least. Motherly love says, “I am not going to put up with anymore of your nonsense.”

That is just the mental picture I have of Jesus as he is described in today’s Gospel reading. His authoritative message of the nearness of God’s kingdom involves a powerful public display that he is not going to put up with anymore of our nonsense. No more demons! No more disease! No more nonsense! Not on Jesus’ watch.

Martin Luther makes this statement about faith (and I think I have mentioned it before); he says,

“O, this faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing!”

Just as “this faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing,” I definitely notice the gospel of the kingdom is or can be a conflicting, disturbing, and powerfully disruptive thing.

It disturbs us in our stuff. It disturbs our complacency. It brings down “principalities and powers” to use the words of Paul.

I use to have a problem with positional vertigo. Whenever I started to spin, I looked for a bed to dive into or a couch to dive on, or else I would just lay myself out on a carpeted floor with eyes closed till the spinning passed. In other words in the presence of instability I sought for any kind of stability. Lying there on the floor, I knew I was not going to fall down or fall through.

Now that is just what we do whenever we are confronted with a sin or a demon or a disease or malady we deem out of our control, we seek out a means of equilibrium.

We seek for a comfort to help us live inside of our discomfort. We seek for some ease to cope with our disease; some balance for our imbalance, some controllable order in the midst of our uncontrol and disorder.

We create complacency in order to cope. But then complacency becomes its own problem to bear. We resist change. We resist the possibility of change.

In today's Gospel Jesus disturbs all that. He commands, he heals, he delivers; he changes what is into what God wants it to be. Like Peter's mother-in-law, he takes us by the hand and forces us from the bed of our own making. At the same time he sets us free he also destroys our self-made equilibrium.

Complacency is useful and even needful. But when it extends beyond its period of usefulness, then it becomes a character flaw and a troubling unclean spirit. It gets in the way of human advancement on the pathway of God. Good gets in way of better; better gets in the way of best; complacency becomes enemy of our soul's progress.

Isaiah prophecies,

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?*

*God brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
When he blows upon them, they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

God gets involved, and competing impediments are blown to the wind like so many false rulers.

But that is not the end of the prophecy; Isaiah says,

*God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
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.*

God disturbs complacency so we can rise above inaction and join his company of heroes who are women and men of action.

A number of years ago I was called to the office of a supervisor who was angry about my performance or lack of performance. At any rate, he identified the problem and expressed his anger.

At first I was surprised and taken aback. Then it was personal.

I visualized he had a stick in his hands and he was beating me with the stick. It hurt. I completely lost sight of the problem on account of the personal pain.

All my defenses were voices in my head like, "I didn't mean to" and "I'm not the only one at fault" and "What right does he have?"

But then I noticed a shift. I was able to grasp he was addressing a problem, and it wasn't about me. In my mind's eye, I stood up from my chair, walked around to his side of the desk, joined my own hands to the same stick, and we started beating down the problem together.

That new mental image changed everything—my attitude, my performance and ultimate outcome of the particular situation.

Peter's mother-in-law gets lifted up and healed; but her healing is not for healing's sake alone. It is for the cause of her freedom to love and freedom to serve; freedom to "run and not be weary," to "walk and not faint"; freedom also to take her place beside Christ and do what it takes to love and serve together with him as he confronts with word and deed the next problem and the next and the next and the next.

Maybe she had the flu, pneumonia, or some other infection. We know she had a fever and was sick in bed. You can relate—no energy, only aches, chills, and sweats. You feel so terrible the last thing you want to do is get up.

When our need is to be encouraged and lifted in our hearts and then Jesus comes to us with such very good news, what we feel instead is disturbance and God's meddling.

We still want to linger in the fever of our wayward souls or the aches of wrongs that have been done to us. We feel so weary or worn down that we don't want to be lifted. We groan at the prospect of lifting and just want to be left alone.

While she was still sick and feverish, Jesus disturbed her complacency. He took her by the hand and lifted her up. Her fever left. She served her guests. In other (metaphorical) words, the woman gets healed so that she can get up from her bed, walk around to Jesus' side, take hold of his stick, and serve alongside. I don't have it on record, but I am pretty confident that from that time on Peter's mother-in-law became a Jesus follower and Jesus activist. Because that is how it worked.

Jesus said, "'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.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons." From town to town those who were healed and delivered became Jesus' new disciples.

Here's my point. "Let us go," Jesus said, and we have got a lot of going to do. There are systemic demons to be rooted out and expunged. There are institutional diseases to be commanded and cured. We have in our community the helpless and hope-less and homeless and hurting who need our hands to lift them up. We have racism and injustice and inequity and white privilege that need our word of command and active involvement to bring them down and scatter them like princes.

So we can't stay stuck in our own stuff. We can't stay stuck in our own complacency. What we need is for Jesus to disturb our false sense of peace and for Jesus to thwart our own sense of false hope. Or else what we need is to confront ourselves in Christ's name.

Jesus preached by word and deed. His spoken message is simple: "God's kingdom has come to you." But Christ's enacted message is disruptive against both demons and disease.

We are soon to be entering the season of Lent with all of its attending self-reflection. What better time is there for us to begin to confront ways in which we have grown too comfort-able in self-satisfaction or too lukewarm or cold in what should be our blazing fires of Jesus activism?

Lord Jesus, come, disturb us now! Amen.