

SERMON – Vince Reed

08 Feb 2009 (EPIP 5B)

“Jesus went over to her, took her by the hand and helped her up, and the fever left her.”

These words are part of our Gospel story this morning from Mark’s community, where Jesus engages in a rather intimate, but non-dramatic, example of healing touch. Mark tells us that Simon-Peter’s mother-in-law is ill with a fever, and that Jesus--without speaking a word--takes her hand, whereupon the fever leaves her, and she resumes her work of serving the community.

For several weeks now, we are following the events recorded in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel; the first stories recorded in the first and earliest written version of the canonical Gospels of Jesus the Christ.

This Gospel begins as Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan and then he immediately goes into the wilderness for forty days: after that he immediately begins calling his disciples and begins his ministry.

And in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ ministry begins with healing. As soon as Jesus calls his first disciples to his side (the fishermen), they go to Capernaum, where Jesus is said to heal someone in the synagogue by verbally ordering a demon to leave him. “Be silent,” he says, “Come out of this person.” And we recall that the spirit immediately leaves with a shriek, amidst violent convulsions (As Jo DeYoung so eloquently said last week: Dealing with our demons can be a loud and messy business). And after that exorcism, they leave the synagogue and go to Simon and Andrew’s house. Which brings us to this morning’s story.

After the exorcism, they leave the synagogue and go to a private home, which is immediately the occasion of another healing. This time with a touch to Simon’s mother-in-law. More healing. This time, a little less dramatic. But still: More healing.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ ministry begins with healing!

For those whose lives he touched—whether they were close to him and his disciples (like Simon-Peter’s mother-in-law) or whether they were perfect strangers gathered on the street outside the door—healing meant a second chance and new hope. In as little as an instant, healing can bring freedom from physical debility as well as inner change and transformation.

And so I think it’s no wonder that the whole city was gathered at Jesus’ door. And we are told that Jesus healed many who were sick with different diseases, and cast out many demons on that day.

But I don't think that earthly healing was an end unto itself in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' ministry. In his very first words as recorded in Mark, Jesus proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." Healing heralded the coming of a kingdom that transcends this world of pain, and sickness, and death. And—most importantly—this kingdom is within the grasp of everyone, and not in some far off place. It offers lasting spiritual integrity in a world where we can experience injustice, weakness, and pain.

We are all in need of healing, even when we are at the peak of our physical ability and our physical vitality. And, meanwhile, our culture and advertizing is abuzz with the latest fountain of youth miracle cures and technology. But we know that neither makeovers nor the latest fad diets can assure us of happiness and fulfillment. Real transformation, as understood in the Gospel, is never a passing fancy. Rather, perhaps paradoxically, the Gospel can make us more acutely aware of our own ultimate earthly frailty and death.

At some point, even those cured personally by Jesus will eventually die an ordinary and inevitable human death.

And perhaps this is the "epiphany" in today's lesson. In a moment of healing we can experience God at work in our lives when we realize that we are ultimately and utterly dependent on God for our very existence. For Mark's Jesus, healing was not so much about breaking or expanding the laws of medical science as it was about the power of God to transform lives and to make all things new.

In the English language the words "healing," "health," wholeness," wellness," and "holiness" all share the same root meaning, and that root meaning is to be "full" or to be "complete." Whatever our stage in life—child, adolescent, middle-aged, or elderly—we all experience our need for something or someone beyond ourselves. We need God's presence not only to make us well, but to make us whole.

So: I think it is important to remember that the earliest recorders of the Gospel didn't write about Jesus commanding the lilies-of-the-field in the kingdom. Nor did they put to paper his profound wisdom on prayer or social reform, or start out by saying that he was a master parable-teller. Rather: They portrayed Jesus as a healer.

This is what the kingdom of God will do for you and in you: It will make you whole!

Well, Jesus' healing power brought Simon-Peter's mother-in-law back into everyday life in God's presence. She is one of many in Mark's Gospel who are healed and restored by Jesus. And—rest assured—there are more stories to come. Stories of lepers and paralytics.

The good new of God in Christ is intended to set us all free from everything that blocks our ability to "get up and go" into the kingdom of God in our lives and in our time. No one is beyond the scope of God in Christ: Not the people of Zimbabwe, not the

populations of Mosul and Basra, not the Palestinians and Israelis, not the men and women in the poppy fields of Afghanistan and Kurdistan, not the homeless in Marquette, not the residents of our hospitals and nursing homes, and not your best friend with cancer, or your loved one with Alzheimer's.

No one and no circumstance is beyond the reach and scope of God's transformative healing power.

And we are called to trust in that transformative power as we live into our Baptismal Covenant in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in this community where we live, and work and vote. We are called to share the fruits and blessings of our lives and labors as we respect and serve the dignity of all of God's creatures.

We are called to engage in God's transformative healing power.

Thank You for all that you do to bring forth the healing and transformative kingdom of God in our midst: Here and now!

God Bless You!