

Sunday, February 5, 2012
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 5

Isaiah 40:21–31
Psalm 147:1–11, 20c
1 Corinthians 9:16–23
Mark 1:29–39
Year B

I.N.I.

Jesus was a healer. Mark the gospeler tells us that much in rapid-fire sequence about the powers of someone portrayed as a divine superhero. But unlike today's drawn-out Super Bowl with slow motion replay after every down, the gospel story moves like a slide show gone haywire. Here's today's story in bulleted form (imagine they are slides). By the way, I'm going to name Simon's mother-in-law "Lois," because women don't get named enough, and I'm going to get tired saying Simon's mother-in-law:

- No sooner is Jesus in the synagogue then he goes to Simon and Andrew's house.
- Seeing Simon's mother-in-law Lois sick, Jesus' lifts her up.
- Lois, the host of the house, begins serving chicken soup.
- Then at day's end Jesus cured many.
- Then the next morning, Jesus goes to a quiet place.
- Then Simon and company look for him.
- Then Jesus moves on.

Still in the first chapter of Mark, concluding this little section, Jesus cuts a path through the northern region of Israel, still teaching, bringing the kingdom of God, and ridding folk of the demonic. Unlike the Super Bowl, with frequent commercial interruptions, Jesus ministry is a continuous staccato flow of action, then a break to pray, then back to action.

The Gospel is action-packed, and meaning-packed. And it begs questions. Who is this Jesus? Whom does he heal? Why does he want to silence the demons?

There are questions that come out of this pithiest Gospel.

Like why does Jesus get away to a deserted place? If one of our highest values is busyness, doesn't this brief but notable interlude in the flurry of life and ministry beg us to bring our lives to a full stop and into the realm of God regularly, if not daily?

Deserted places, *sigh*. Martin Luther challenges my attention span when he says an hour is the minimum time frame for prayer. Aren't there too many distractions that seem to come up that get in the way of this carving out a way for God?

Barbara DeGrote-Sorensen and her husband David wrote a book *'Tis a Gift to be Simple: Embracing the Freedom of Living with Less*, where they say

Life, by its very nature, doles out distractions. And frequently, just because God isn't here with audible demands as loud as the telephone or doorbell, we may displace God while we deal with the everyday details. Awareness of God may be put aside for a moment until things settle down. But do things ever settle down? Not for long. Putting God aside can become a habit with lots of good intentions tacked on. – (Minneapolis: Augsburg, ©1992), p 48

In Isaiah, the first reading, ancient Israel is down in the dumps because they feel forgotten in their housing crisis. They were banished from their homeland and under the crunch of principalities and powers that said the prevailing culture and beliefs were the way to live. The prophet Isaiah trumpets that God is above all and around all. Not some puny god of the Babylonians, but the one who makes and creates what they called gods. And what about reckless despots who wield power and seem to carry the day? They will be aware of limits when justice and truth, and age topple them!

To whom is God close? Those who are weak. Those who are exhausted. Those who Isaiah says wait on the Lord.

Jesus is a healer. Lois is laid low with what was and still can be a life-threatening disease. Her world came to a screeching halt. She was displaced from her family. In Mark's perfunctory storytelling, we have clue about Jesus' intention for the ill. He **lifts Lois up**, the same verb which is later applied to his own being raised from the dead. Jesus brings about the kingdom of God, the nearness of God to those in need, to those who are ill, and to those in the throes of death. It says Lois served them, which sounds like "back to work." But it could mean that she was now able to claim her place as host, her desire to be back in the community, her coming back as it were—to life.

People who are ill are the ones whose lives are brought to a full stop. In my experience, when I enter into the lives of the sick and in grief, it is they who have made me aware of the need and of the presence of one who is above all and around all. They are among my greatest teachers about the awareness of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says this about the ill:

Love toward sick members should have a special place in the Christian congregation. Christ comes near to us in the sick. The pastor who neglects the visitation of the sick must ask whether or not he [or she] can exercise his [or her] office on the whole.

Sick people ask for healing. They cry for release from this body of death into a new and healthy body. They cry for the new world in which "God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more suffering or cry or pain" (Rev. 21:4). Insofar as this happens, the sick inquire about Christ more than do the well. –from *Spiritual Care*, translated by Jay C. Rochelle (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, ©1985), pp 56-57.

Persis Martin is one of a kind. At age eighty-five you can still see she has the body of a dancer, thin, and beautiful. Her late husband Wally was my good friend and mentor, a retired pastor who was gentle and appreciative, and who assisted me with communion every week. Persis was his

second wife and not the stereotypical pastor's wife of that generation. She was outspoken. She was adventurous! About three years ago, Persis got dreadful news. Lung cancer. Full stop. She knew her diagnosis was dire, because she was a nurse.

One Sunday after her diagnosis, during the announcements, Persis motioned to me that she had something to say. Her dignified Pastor Walter did not always appreciate Persis taking the microphone from me, because you never knew what would come out of her mouth! Persis said, "I have lung cancer, and it's a lesson because for years I smoked like a chimney. I did stop about ten years ago, but I'm facing a long series of treatment and I don't know what's ahead. Let me just say that I want your prayers, and if you are wondering whether you should ask me how I'm doing, if you want to know how my disease is, I am telling you not to be shy or afraid because I will tell you. And I know that God will be with me and that your care will be needed." Assertive, lovely. and sick Persis brought that congregation near to Christ and brought Christ near to her. She is still well, and glad to have her story of the blessing of the congregation told.

I think that there are times for us to be drawn into God's presence as we carve out time and space in silence. I think that illness, our own or another's, can also bring attentiveness to God's closeness. I also think that sometimes we must live through the questions about God's presence when life circumstances seem unjust or bereft. And in these places I would hope that the community can offer an ear, a hand, or a hug, if words cannot be found.

Finally today's gospel story there is that movement from full stop to another place. Jesus could have stayed in his own community, with his disciples, with those who peered through the door. But as his disciples sought him, Jesus responds with "okay, let's go." Because he could not stay in one place in order to bring the nearness of God.

A teacher once said that the movement of the Christian life is on the continuum of a figure eight between the **altar** and the **street**. He suggested that that altar, being in the presence of God, drinking up the love and saving grace of Christ, being filled with the Spirit could absolutely be the right place to be. And being on the street, representing Christ, attending to the neighbor in need, bringing injustice to right could absolutely also be the right place to be. But the problem is if we get stuck in one place, rather than moving toward one place or the other.

When I see the stream of Christ's friends claimed for the kingdom, lifted up in their baptismal journeys, moving toward that kingdom offered in bread and wine, I see that figure eight. Some people benefit from being attended to by Jesus who comes to lift them up. Others feel pushed out into the world to claim it from ruin as ambassadors for Christ, filled with God who rules all and is over all. Some are living the questions, somewhere in between.

What is it for you today? Are you seeking a quiet place? Do you need to move on? Or do you need to be lifted up?

Whatever it is, let us all make room for Christ, move with Christ, and bear Christ with others. For Christ comes to heal and to save, and move on, wherever we are.

I.N.I.