

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 4, 2024 – 5 Epiphany
Mark 1: 29-39
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The first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark, just before he begins his ministry, are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). In Jesus the rule of God is revealed, the dream of God for humanity comes alive. When we see what Jesus does, we see God’s action in human life. In last week’s lesson we heard an account of Jesus performing an exorcism. A man was possessed by an “unclean spirit,” a demon, an evil representative of Satan opposed to God. Jesus cast out the demon and healed the man. Good overcame evil. In the church we affirm our faith that God will ultimately be victorious over all that opposes God.

In this morning’s lesson we follow Jesus and his four disciples out of the synagogue where Jesus had just cast out this demon and we go with them to Simon Peter’s home. Peter’s mother-in-law was ill with a fever. This was a serious issue in a world without antibiotics. As soon as they arrive, Jesus is told about the woman who is ill. Clearly the people hope that he will do something. Mark tells us that Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her.” Jesus didn’t say any words of power, as he had when he commanded the unclean spirit to leave the man who was possessed. He didn’t even pray to the Father. He said nothing. He simply took her hand and lifted her up, and she was healed and able to return to her normal activity. In the privacy of her home and through the simplest of human gestures, this woman was given her life back. We see again what God’s rule looks like in human life. Health, wholeness, renewed strength.

Another word about this passage. Many women have taken offense at the idea that when this woman was healed “she began to serve them,” because this seems to underscore and support the subservient status of women. There’s no doubt that the society of that time and place was patriarchal. But I don’t think we should be derailed by that as we consider this account today. There are two significant points about what Peter’s mother-in-law did. First, she got up and continued with her normal activity in the family household. This is what happens when Jesus heals people. They are restored to their condition prior to their illness or possession by demons, and they are enabled to return to their place in the family or community. Second and more important, when healed, the woman served Jesus and his followers. She didn’t take her healing for granted and go on her way to resume life as if nothing had happened – as 9 of the 10 lepers Jesus healed did (Luke 17:11-19). The Gospel accounts teach us that the right responses when Jesus heals people – then or now, including people like us – are gratitude to God, following Jesus, and serving others. In other words, righteous living, according to God’s teaching.

The news about Jesus soon spread. Here was a man who could cast out demons and heal the sick. So the people “brought to him all who were sick and possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.” “The

whole city was gathered around the door.” Everyone in the city was either sick, possessed by demons, or was actively concerned about those who were sick or possessed by demons. This is an interesting description of the human condition, isn’t it? Suffering of all kinds is everywhere. We are all touched by disease and the disruption of evil. Every Sunday when we gather here to pray, we bear witness to the fact that our lives, the lives of those we care for, and the lives of our brothers and sisters all over the world are harmed and hindered by more troubles than we can name.

As people of faith and as followers of Jesus we struggle with the problem of human suffering. We suffer ourselves, and we are constantly faced with news of the suffering of others. We ask “why?” We ask “where is God?” We pray for God to act, to do something, to cast out evil and to heal the world. But the suffering continues. If God is all good, all powerful, and all knowing, why is there such suffering, among human beings and in all creation? In theology this problem is called “theodicy,” a term with roots in two Greek words, for God and justice.

I have thought long and hard about this problem over many years, and I have read the work of some of the philosophers and theologians who have written about theodicy. Many people have given different “answers” to the problem. In my mind no “answer” is really adequate. I will share a couple of my conclusions about the problem, not original but personal in the sense that they make sense to me. I think we have to look beyond this life and the world as we know it to reconcile our experience and understanding of suffering and God. In other words, if this life is all there is, then the problem becomes impossible to solve, in my opinion. I often think of a line from a favorite Gospel song, “A moment in God’s kingdom will make up for it all.” Perhaps that’s it. Or perhaps St. Paul’s claim is as much answer as we can have: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Meanwhile, we make choices about how to live our lives, in the freedom of will which God has given us, in the context of our personal gifts and experiences. My guiding principles are to be as careful as I can not to add to the suffering of other people or other creatures and to do what I can to promote and participate in what Episcopal Relief and Development once described as its mission – “healing a hurting world.” To try to make these principles a reality in my daily life is challenging enough for me.

I invite you to think about what your guiding principles are with regard to living out your faith in Jesus. How is God calling you to participate in God’s work in the world? We know from the witness of other Christians in the past and the present that God calls people to very varied expressions of God’s will and work. What is yours? How can you become more faithful to God’s call day by day? And how can we support one another as we seek to do God’s will?

It is good for us to give thought to the ways in which God is working in the lives of the people of St. Columba’s. We probably recognize God’s work in our own lives, and we have a good idea of how what we do expresses our faith. How do we see God’s

work in and through the lives of the other people who gather here for worship? You might want to try this method to guide your thoughts. Slowly, person by person, go through the names in our parish directory. Do you know how God has touched that person? You may, and if you do, pause to thank God for God's work in that person's life. If you don't, maybe you'd like to ask.

Then think about how that person witnesses to his or her faith here at church and in the world. The people of St. Columba's are generous with time, talent, and treasure so that the parish continues to be strong. People are compassionate and take good care of one another. I am sometimes in awe of the courage and faithfulness among our people. And think of the work people do in the larger world – careers in teaching and scholarship, law and medicine, raising families and caring for the elderly, volunteering to feed the hungry, rescue animals, and protect the environment, giving to provide food, shelter, and medicine to people in other countries. That's just a sample of the awesome witness of our members to their faith in God and God's goodness.

I invite you to think this way about the people here not so that we can congratulate ourselves, but so that we can appreciate and be grateful for some of the ways in which God is in action here and now, in and through us. We can take one another for granted without thinking about what is behind a kind word, a caring act, a generous gift, hours spent in dull labor that needs to be done to keep the parish going, even getting to church on Sunday morning. I hope that appreciating one another more will strengthen us to be faithful in a difficult and challenging world.

In Jesus the reign of God has come near. When we see what Jesus does, we see what God's rule looks like in human life. We see God in action, God's dream a reality. We see evil subdued, diseases cured, strength given to the powerless, and the wounds of the brokenhearted healed. We believe that this is what God does because God is love and God loves us. As followers of Jesus each of us is called to join in God's work in the church and in the world, to love our neighbors as ourselves. May the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, help us to hear and answer God's call each day. In Jesus' name. Amen.