**Sermon for February 4, 2024 “Where Ya Been?” Mark 1:29-39**

*After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “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.*

Our travels with St. Mark continue this morning; two weeks ago we journeyed from Nazareth up to Capernaum, and last week we paused at the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus was an overnight success, a marvel of *exousia*, a preacher with authority that emanated from deep within. Today, we take our cues from these words: *After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.* Extra points if you recall these two sets of brothers from the lakeside village of Capernaum: Simon Peter and Andrew, our burly blue-collar fishermen, and James and John, the more white-collar small business owners, fishermen too, but with employees to share the work. Extra points if you also noticed that they don’t go to the fancy home of Zebedee, but to the more humble abode of Peter’s mother-in-law. And super bonus points if you noticed that, *finally*, the holy circle is expanding, not just to men of different tax brackets, but to women. Alas, Peter’s mother-in-law is feeling poorly and cannot just leap up to be the hostess with the moistest, but never fear, Jesus is here! He steps right in and lifts her by the hand, and she is healed, immediately! And with no more than a smile of thanks, she heads to the kitchen to rustle up some figs and stuff.

We have been tagging along on this little trip with Jesus as his ministry flowed out of him to include different kinds of guys and now an older woman. And I know I am ahead of the curve, but we know where this ministry is going, right? . It’s not just for Jewish folks, not just for dudes or damsels, it is expanding every day. So I am quite comfortable describing that ongoing spiritual expansion in the words of the late, great, hymn writer, Fred Kaan, who wrote this classic poetry when I was just five years old:

**For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord,**

**for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.  
To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word;**

**help us rise and pledge our word!**

That’s where this is going, friends, this magnificent Markan healing story, which will soon enough tell us of the scope and variety of folks who come to Jesus for healing, and that healing is provided, without cost, no strings attached. Listen again: *That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.* This gospel was written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 of our common era. The Jews of that era had somehow endured the quirky lunacy of Nero, whose successor Vespasian had no affection for the early Christians or the Jews, and his escalating persecutions included the razing and desecrating of Solomon’s Temple. With this kind of stressful public life, surrounded by polytheistic religions on all sides, it is not surprising that Mark ascribes the maladies of the people to the presence of demons. How else to explain the levels of horror and inhumanity swirling around them? And while most people alive today do not credit demons with the ills of society, there are certainly people who do. I personally do not know enough to conclude either for or against the existence of demons, but Jesus certainly seemed to have convictions about them! And I suppose, at the end of the day, it is the *healing* that counts, more than the original source of the dis-ease. Demons? Epilepsy? Malevolent angels? Schizophrenia? We simply don’t have enough data to decide what Jesus was working with, but we *do* have enough information to conclude that he managed these aberrations with compassion and courage. And I say aberrations quite deliberately, friends, because what needed healing that evening was the distorted, warped *relationships* between God and people, between neighbors and nations, and between the two faces that square off in the proverbial mirror. Some sets of stressors and violent variables had people really out of phase, but Jesus helped them re-integrate, helped them come back to the integrity God had built into each of us. So again, the poet gives us both challenge and comfort:

**Lead us forward into freedom; from despair your world release,  
that, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.  
Show us how through care and goodness**

**fear will die and hope increase; fear will die and hope increase!**

That sounds, to me, like a brilliant synopsis of Jesus’ varied healings and helpfulness: his care and goodness caused fear to die and hope to increase. Caused superstition to die, and faith to increase. It is God’s design that all may come and go in peace, but we are not yet ready. We need redemption, we need restoration, we need a leader who inspires us to faith beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

Our story continues: *In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.”* Where ya been, Teacher? You were such a hit last night, people can’t get enough of you! But super duper extra bonus points if you ferreted out the emerging pattern already: that ministry is both exciting and exhausting, that sharing care and goodness takes a toll on one’s energy and health, and that the example here is not just the healing of others, but the healing of ourselves. Fred Kaan says it big in this way:

**All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned:  
pride of status, race, or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.  
In our common quest for justice may we hallow life’s brief span;**

**may we hallow life’s brief span!**

Even Jesus, a young buck barely thirty years old, did not know the span of his earthly life. But he knew that he must honor, that he must make holy all the aspects of his life, not just the flashy miracle bits. His most famous preaching, the Sermon on the Mount, continues to inspire the kind of fantastic poetry we have just heard, a recitation that I suspect would be roundly endorsed by Jesus. Don’t let the things of this world diminish the abundance of your life! Don’t let pride or judgy dogma build a wall between you and God! For we all ultimately want life to be just and peaceful, and to make it so we must imbue it with holiness.

We’re nearly done, but Mark has saved the best for last: *Jesus answered them: “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.* Bonus points are yours if you heard Jesus was moving on, not going back to the already-healed ones for another ego boost, but moving on, to share his truth and healing gifts. That is why I have come here, he says, and we know he doesn’t mean just Galilee. He came to Earth, took on human flesh and form, because he had a message for the world…and our hymn concludes with that message, beautifully rendered:

**You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind.  
For our growing in your likeness, bring the life of Christ to mind.  
that by our response and service, earth its destiny may find;**

**earth its destiny may find!**

That’s why he came; that we, all and each, and Creation itself, might grow into its God-given destiny. And that destiny, ah, you *know* it, is to grow more and more into godly people, responsive, gracious, willing to serve and save. To grow more and more into godly societies, who honor life, who abhor the diminution of others, who defend the powerless and champion a more equitable world. To grow more and more upon a godly planet, whose abundance and vigor still amaze despite our most selfish efforts. The hymn writers get the last word today: this is my Father’s world, and let me never forget, that though the wrong seems oh, so strong, God is the ruler yet! Amen!