“Edge of the Inside”

Isaiah 40:21-31 Mark 1:29-39

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First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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We tend to read the gospel stories as if they’re smooth, ironed out. Following from place to place, Jesus is shown healing people, preaching in synagogues, calling disciples. We know the basic Christian storyline and are good at making assumptions based on already established attitudes and beliefs. The shock value has largely gone flat from scripture. We’re so many cultures removed, we tend to miss the scandals interwoven through what Jesus does and how he goes about his ministry. Jesus lives an alternative orthodoxy; teaching as a Rabbi on the inside of the system, but from the edge, the margins, often dabbling across lines we construct in what’s considered mainstream.

In the passage from Mark, we can’t even get through the first three verses without major red flags waving in the breeze, things that are scandalous to those first century believers hearing this gospel read. Remember, Jesus has just healed a man and even shows authority over demons during a scene in the synagogue at the village of Capernaum. This is Peter’s town, the one called Simon in this story. It’s the house of Simon and his brother, Andrew that they enter “as soon as they left the synagogue.” In other words, it’s still the Sabbath, which means special rules apply to behavior and certain things are forbidden by narrowly interpreted religious law.

Simon’s mother-in-law is sick in bed and “they told [Jesus] about her at once.” So those are the bookends, emphasizing the fact this is on the Sabbath on the heels of worship in the synagogue. “As soon as” starts it, “at once” brings conclusion. These build literary intensity, for us it’s more like music swelling and getting faster in the background of an action-adventure movie. Your body just knows things are getting wild and life is on the edge! As soon as… At once!

It’s the third verse in this section, verse 31, that really takes it over the top! “[Jesus] came [into the bedroom of this woman] and took her by the hand [touching an ill person, making physical contact with a woman in her bed] and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Another healing, on the Sabbath! He took her, this is Jesus-directed. That “she began to serve them” indicates not a gender bias, but a social restoration. In that culture, hospitality was a key aspect of life. She begins to serve not from obligation, but through satisfaction that she could offer kindness and welcome. But, it’s also the Sabbath and she shouldn’t be working very much at all, and yet here she is, celebrating the presence of Jesus in their midst, serving Jesus joyfully, the same Greek word used to describe her serving as the action of angels in Mark 1:13.

From there, sundown comes so the Sabbath is over, and in the evening all the people of the town show up at the door. Jesus cures many from various diseases and has authority to silence the demons. That sums up the visit to Capernaum, and Jesus is now popular in the region. He could have set up shop, opened a healing business, a religious outpost. “Fishing for people” was turning out pretty well, just like he told those first disciples he would show them if they followed him.

But something happened that night, in the darkest time, near the morning. Jesus gets up, goes to a deserted place by himself, “and there he prayed.” Mark doesn’t write about what Jesus prayed, or how he prayed, simply mentions it was still, very dark, deserted. That Jesus would actively engage in God’s Presence, in such a place, at such a time; this is a great example of Centering Prayer or other meditative, contemplative practices and spiritual disciplines. But it’s also an encouraging metaphor, that no matter how bleak our lives can appear, even the times where God seems hidden in the dark, we can still be connected, trusting, praying without ceasing simply by breathing, living with intention.

Notice when he’s discovered by Simon and the other companions, the word they use to describe how “everyone is looking for him,” is a word conveying tone or context: hunted. Jesus is hunted. He’s spending time alone, in a wilderness place, deserted, and the hunters are on the scene. Hunters pursing a quarry, seeking to capture or kill something for their own benefit, not necessarily the benefit of the prey. Jesus is praying, and he’s the prey. The hunters, the pursuers, want to use him and “everyone is searching for” him. He’s alone in being alone.

Another metaphor? We all want God to do stuff for us, to make our lives shaped and secure in certain ways, to heal our loved ones. Suffering puts us on the pursuit, on the hunt for a cure for what ails us. That’s legitimate enough, and everyone does this! The entire town is there, the crowds of people are the hunters, and we are too.

Jesus, the healer, under the cover of darkness, slips away to spend time with God, alone in prayer. When Jesus is baptized, the whole town of Jerusalem had been going out to the Jordan to see John the Baptizer. Then the Spirit leads Jesus, alone, into the wilderness. Much like those temptations in the desert, confronted by the devil, now in Capernaum, Jesus needs to decide, once again, what his focus will be, even as the angels continue waiting on him, helping him sustain his ministry of loving presence.

Jesus tells Simon that it’s time to go, they need to move on to neighboring towns, sharing the word of God throughout Galilee, “proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Notice that last sentence, “in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Important to realize that God’s action and activity can occur outside of formal worship and religious structures. There’s a distinction there as Jesus preaches in the synagogues and casts out demons, healed people, like in Simon’s house, away from religious centers, among people in their families and communities. For those early Christians hearing Mark’s gospel for the first time, this is especially important because the Temple in Jerusalem is under siege and even destroyed, and Christians are struggling as the Roman-Jewish war only leads Israel to defeat. That Jesus is still powerfully at work on behalf of believers in ways that promise restoration, renewal, and right relationship is so important. It’s also a gift.

A couple “take homes” include the emphasis on how pivotal it is that Jesus spends time alone with God in prayer, in the wilderness. Sitting in silence, inviting God’s spaciousness to open in your heart, allowing the Spirit to mingle in your soul, even as we learn how to release distractions and the many thoughts that hunt us down relentlessly; this is a lesson in the ministry of Presence.

Another take home that often gets overlooked is that Simon, who we know better as Peter, is married. Peter’s wife is not mentioned in any other parts of the Gospel and we don’t even know her name, but because Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, one can, by extension, figure that her daughter is Simon Peter’s wife. Peter is married.

I like what David Lose, a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis makes of this often ignored fact. He says, “I kind of think […] most of us tend to think of the disciples as, well, not like the rest of us. Like they were cut from different cloth, led very different lives, were destined to be Jesus’ disciples from the beginning, and generally are just plain different. Yes, we know they fell short and weren’t perfect, and yet I still have a hunch that we have a hard time relating to them. (They do go on, after all, to start the Church!) But Peter has a mother-in-law… who is sick… and he’s worried about her… and he asks Jesus for help. He is, in other words, kind of ordinary. Like us.” (In the Meantime…, a preaching resource blog, <http://www.davidlose.net/2021/02/epiphany-5-b-jesus-ministry-and-ours/>).

When I was talking about hunting down Jesus to cure our diseases, I don’t mean to sound like that is a bad thing to do, especially on behalf of our loved ones, like Simon for his mother-in-law. It’s a normal thing to do, it shows you care. The disciples are normal, like us, which means we are like them. That Simon has a wife is a normal thing. That their family lives in a multi-generational household, for that culture, that’s a normal thing. Jesus is pointing out that God’s action and activity takes place in ordinary life!

Jesus preaches and teaches within the system, but he’s not limited to the structure of religious rigidity. He spends time alone in prayer, beyond the margins, and this is the revolutionary activity, this is the source of his actions, the foundation of his faithfulness with God. While so many people are busy, hunting for what they think they need, Jesus is showing us what we already have.

Relationship with God, fellowship with each other, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us as spirit and matter merge, the wholeness of God’s love given and shared; these all sustain us in ways that nothing else can. Those first disciples discovered this, including how difficult it is to actually live it; those early Christians discovered this, even as their world crumbled around them. We are invited to not only hunt for Jesus, but to sit with him, to open our hands to receive God’s loving Presence, to make time to pray, to breathe, rest, renew, in whatever ways help us in this grounding with our Source.

To close, let’s remember Isaiah’s suggestion, that: “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.” Jesus shows us the pivotal importance of taking action based on the foundation of contemplation, which is experiential prayer and spending time alone with God. Thanks be to God for meeting us in the wilderness as the angels serve with joy. And may God’s humble and vulnerable love be glorified, now and forever. Amen.