

“Sing the Wondrous Story”
Mark 1:29-39
Sermon #88
5th Sunday After the Epiphany
48th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
2.7.21

Mark 1:29-39 CEB

29 After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. **30** Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. **31** He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

32 That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. **33** The whole town gathered near the door. **34** He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn’t let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

35 Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. **36** Simon and those with him tracked him down. **37** When they found him, they told him, “Everyone’s looking for you!”

38 He replied, “Let’s head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That’s why I’ve come.” **39** He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week, Jesus was in the synagogue. This first miracle in Mark gave us a glimpse of the cosmic battle of good vs. evil. But, we know that Jesus confronted an already defeated enemy that would surface again throughout the Gospel of Mark. In that tense moment in the synagogue, Jesus turned chaos into peace. And everyone was amazed.

The beginning of today's verses happen mere moments after that encounter in the synagogue. Jesus, James, and John follow Simon and Andrew to their house. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever and the men immediately told Jesus about her predicament. As a general rule, fevers aren't as deadly as they were 2,000 years ago. However, while certainly more deadly back then, a fever is just as bad as being possessed by an evil spirit in the 1st century world. It's deadly, yes. And in the ancient world, the fever is not

seen as a symptom, “but as itself a deadly power”.¹ Many times, there’s no coming back from it.

What’s worse, though, for Simon’s mother-in-law, is that she is unable to show hospitality to Jesus and his first followers. It’s possible that’s why they told Jesus at once about her situation. They wanted to excuse her from her duties as hostess. Plus, they were probably not expecting healing because they hadn’t seen Jesus heal anyone, yet. Yes, Jesus threw some demons out of a man, but Jesus hadn’t yet healed someone from a physical ailment.

Regardless, Simon’s mother-in-law is out of commission. She’s plagued by a fever and she can’t show hospitality to strangers.

¹ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary*. WJKPress: Louisville, 2006, p. 66.

Several verses later, Jesus is by himself. He has confronted more evil spirits and is praying alone early the next morning.

“Jesus!!! Jesus!!! Where are you?!?!?!?!?” Simon and company track down Jesus. “Everyone’s looking for you!!!”

Simon, Andrew, James, John, and some others want to go back to Capernaum. Jesus is getting to be popular! So, it makes sense to want to go back to a place where you’re well-liked. Why not go back because you’re popular?!? That must feel pretty good.

“Let’s head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so I can preach there too. That’s why I’ve come.”

Thanks, Jesus, for putting a damper on the fun.

It doesn't make sense! And frankly, Simon's mother-in-law's action after her being healed is confusing, too. She gets out of bed and starts feeding the men.

This past week, I noticed an article from the Canadian Broadcasting Network about an organist named John Challenger.² He is the Assistant Music Director at Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England. Two times a week, the cathedral is a COVID-19 vaccine center. It's gothic architecture makes it perfect to become a vital host to the public because of "its beauty, size, and ventilation".³

²https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.5897764/british-cathedral-delivers-2-in-1-shot-with-vaccine-and-live-organ-music-1.5897765?fbclid=IwAR0CIY0Ksas6aYm6RTBNEq681Ka7iUmU_rjx9cQvh64RpTaB_1wpwAXc6nA

³ Ibid.

The interviewer, Carol Off, didn't mention Challenger's age.

However, his picture looks like he's in his 30s. Maybe older or maybe younger. I don't know. But, he was approached to provide some music for those waiting before and after their shots. Since he hadn't been able to play in front of a live audience in months, this also gave Mr. Challenger an opportunity to minister to the people through music and, being one of the only places in the UK one can hear live music, the organist can see and hear people's reactions in the cathedral.

I think what drew me to this article was obvious and not as obvious. Obvious in that as a musician, this article is more proof that music and the performing arts will have a place in a COVID world. Music is still needed. What wasn't as obvious at first, however, was that I was drawn to this article because of my perception of Challenger's

age. He's taking a risk, just like all the frontline workers do whether they administer the vaccines, bag your groceries, sort your mail, or they're are the person that helps form the medical team taking care of you.

I'm not sure what the age requirements are for getting the vaccine in England. But, here in North Carolina, a 35-year-old preacher with no pre-existing conditions is low on the totem pole. And please, hear me out, I'm not complaining about it. I'm thankful that North Carolina is holding its own and having a more successful rollout of the vaccine than other states. When my time comes to get it, I'll be thankful.

But, Mr. Challenger is taking a risk whether or not he has the vaccine. He's serving the people through the Ministry of Music. While people are waiting they may hear Bach, Handel, or something light-hearted. This moment John Challenger is sharing with people has become so popular that some overstay their 15 minutes after receiving the vaccine because this gift of music soothes the souls of so many people who have been hurting not only from the disease, but from the emotional and mental trauma of severe isolation.

Thinking about this article, Simon's mother-in-law, and Jesus taking his followers into the opposite direction makes more sense now. If Mark's agenda in his Gospel is to demonstrate that God is on the loose in our world, then yes, Jesus needs to head in the opposite direction because that's why he came. He came to serve. Simon's

mother-in-law's act of service was not a mere act of service because that's what was expected of her in the 1st century world as a woman. She is an example for each and everyone of us, even if some of us are not in ordered ministry of the church, as how we gratefully respond to the LORD's work in our lives. While she was extremely sick in bed with a fever, Jesus took her by the hand and raised her up! And her response is not out of obligation, but gratitude. A grateful response!!! I imagine Mr. Challenger is operating the same way as he plays music for many anxious and frightened people in the cathedral. He's been given several gifts: Life, energy, compassion, music, a gorgeous space to play, and a mighty fine pipe organ to help create an atmosphere of peace for so many frightened people.

We, too, have been given gifts. And guess what?!?! It doesn't have to be Stewardship Season for me to talk about Stewardship. Like Mr. Challenger, Simon's mother-in-law, or Jesus going in the opposite direction, each one demonstrated that our gifts are to be shared, not hoarded. If we respond gratefully like Simon's mother-in-law, share a moment of peace like John Challenger, or go in the opposite direction like Jesus because God is on the loose, then, siblings in Christ, what would it look like if our varied gifts were, because of the Spirit's power, on the loose in our frightened world?

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.