

## Mark 1:29-39

<sup>29-31</sup> Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew's house, accompanied by James and John. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

<sup>32-34</sup> That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn't let them say a word.

<sup>35-37</sup> While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, "Everybody's looking for you."

<sup>38-39</sup> Jesus said, "Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come." He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

## Immersed in Hope

On Tuesday I went to a clergy workshop in Manhattan organized by our DS, and the focus of the workshop was GRIEF and dealing with grief. One of the pastors attending the workshop was a friend and colleague, a young pastor who was married and had a young son, and last June his wife suddenly and unexpectedly suffered a heart attack and died. I could not even imagine the pain that this man and his young son had suffered and how he has been able to cope with weight of this tragedy. I think the DS had Jason in mind when she selected the topic for this gathering: Grief.

The main speaker, Andrea Raynor, is an author and hospice spiritual counselor and shared with us a lot of her wisdom in matters of grief. One thing she mentioned that seemed particularly relevant to me was a phenomenon she called grief fatigue, and how we can go numb from being exposed to too much disaster; she shared with the recent string of natural

disasters in the Caribbean, Texas, Florida, and California combined with the shooting in Las Vegas added to the long string of tragedies and disasters that stretch back so long and the individual cases that she deals with in hospice care that she just burned out on grief.

And I think that grief burnout is itself a disaster because it leaves people feeling helpless or hopeless or at the very least very pessimistic about the world. It probably leads to a lot of drug abuse as people try to escape the sad landscape that the news broadcasts paint for us. You know when you have thousands of journalists working with technology that enables us to know just about everything that happens anywhere in the world, you know there's a lot of death and suffering and tragedy and disaster out there, and people do feel overwhelmed and can grow numb or depressed or indifferent.

But Jesus shows us a different way, a way that is grounded in hope. There was certainly plenty of bad news to go around in Jesus' day. He lived in a nation under an authoritarian regime – public executions were common. Add to that a dismal infant mortality rate, a lack of resources for adequate health and hygiene and a slew of diseases and illnesses that yielded a life expectancy of about 30 years and we would say that our world is a virtual paradise compared to his. No one has an accurate account of how many people Jesus healed, of how many demons he cast out of folks, but we see in our reading today that he moved on from one town to go to another while people were still seeking him out, presumably to get healed or get their loved ones healed. I don't think Jesus turned villages completely around, from sick to healthy, repressed to unrepressed; when he left there were still lots of sick people, and the tax collectors still came around and the Romans still told the people what they could and couldn't do.

But our reading by indicating that he preached and threw out demons, and that was a different sort healing than his healing ministry. **CASTING OUT DEMONS AND PREACHING INDICATES THAT JESUS WAS HEALING PEOPLE'S SPIRITS**, making them whole in a way that was more important than physical well being or social equity could accomplish. He left people with **HOPE**. He told them that God's kingdom had indeed

arrived, which may have sounded puzzling to them at first. His preaching, like his parables, were ways of showing people what the Kingdom of God was really all about, and in so doing people were able to see that Jesus was right, **THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD WAS INDEED PRESENT IN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THOSE WHO WERE READY TO EMBRACE THAT KINGDOM.** There would still be sickness and death and injustice and violence in the world around them, but if they **BELIEVED** in God's love and in the promise that in the end all things would once again fall under God's rule, then people could face and even overcome their hardships. This is not the art of positive thinking exactly, because the art of positive thinking leaves out the very important element of repentance, and repentance was the first thing Jesus talked about when he started his ministry: repent and believe the good news. Telling a person that God loves them when their world is falling apart is not always very helpful, because they really aren't that interested in knowing the heart of God...and telling someone who is very well off that God loves them may only serve as a justification for their own selfish pursuits ("Hey God loves me – that's why I'm super rich!"). But as many people who are rich are apt to discover, **MONEY DOES NOT NECESSARILY LEAD TO JOY. HAVING A TRUE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS WHAT BRINGS US TRUE JOY.**

And having a relationship with God means that we walk with God and God walks with us. And that is more important than anything else. I just watched a movie about Joan of Arc, and she, like most martyrs, faced a decision: either walk with God or save your own life, and the reason we remember her is that she chose to walk with God – it was not a cakewalk, and she had many moments of doubt and fear during her trial; like Jesus she could cry out, "My God! Why...?" But her peace came from the Holy Spirit that affirmed to her that she was doing the right thing by **NOT** signing a confession of any sin.

The Holy Spirit girds us to face our challenges, and it is so important that in this world where horrible news is thrown at us from every direction that we are able to see all things in relation to God's love and his promise to us of life eternal in his kingdom. That sustains us and empowers us to be

joyful witnesses of the resurrection. Christ is risen! We have nothing to fear in the long run. So stay immersed in the memory of your baptism, that you are claimed by God for eternity. Stay immersed in that hope. And share this good news, through word and through deed, with those who are too immersed in dread and in fear. Show them the light that darkness cannot overcome. Amen.