

Nativity Lutheran Church  
Palm Beach Gardens, FL  
February 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany  
Text: St. Mark 1:29-39  
Theme: What Can You Do after That?

In Nomine Jesu

**<sup>29</sup>As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup>Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup>He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.**

**<sup>32</sup>That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup>And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup>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.**

**<sup>35</sup>In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup>And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup>When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." <sup>38</sup>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." <sup>39</sup>And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.**

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One of the joys of being in this chancel each week ... who knows how long I'll have that blessing ... is joining in publicly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ at Nativity. And each time I prepare for that, I'm almost irresistibly tempted to try to say something especially memorable or touching or inspiring ... (even though that's probably not a worthy goal]. And sometimes clues about how to do it right are hard to come by. So today I decided to just use Jesus' own ministry as the clue for my words today.

This text, coupled with last few weeks', focus not on the outcome and conclusion of Jesus' ministry, but the beginning. And what a way to start! Last week dealing head-on with a demon and freeing a long enslaved man. Almost breathtaking. And this week?

Well, taking on what might be thought to be lesser demons – a woman with a fever and many who were sick in town ... plus a little reprise of last week's demon demolition ...and this text ramps it up significantly. One can just see the headlines in the Capernaum Chronicle: "New Synagogue Whiz – Spectacular!" and the headier Money Street Journal: "Health Futures Rise with Modern Spiritualist Healer"!

Everyone, it seems, is buzzing about all they're hearing and about how this new prophet is not just "talking the talk" but "walking the walk" in his ministry of declaring that there's a new reign afoot, with healing and mercy and health at its core.

St. Mark reports it well, but – as always – drops a hint, teeny as it might be – about what's really going on. You had to listen ... indeed have to read it ... really carefully to catch it. In our text, about halfway through at verse 32, we are told:

**That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.**

Did you catch that little word "all" ... who were sick or possessed with demons?

Well, just two verses later we read ...

**And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.**

Again, a clue in a little word ... "many"; he cured "many". I wonder why Mark didn't report that he'd cured all of them? After all, it would certainly have added a mighty powerful punch to the news reports, right?

But the neither Mark nor Jesus is into headlines. Jesus kept the demons quiet this time. Simon's fever-cured mom doesn't stop for interviews ... she gets back to the honored opportunity to preside as hostess for her guests. And after a perhaps troubled night's sleep from all the excitement and adulation of the previous day, Jesus got up early and found a quiet, deserted place to get his head back together.

But the disciples still didn't get it. Once they'd gathered their wits that morning and couldn't find Jesus when they looked for him, they wondered what new day's excitement might be in store for them. They noticed him gone and they searched frantically for him. Finally their hunt for him proved successful.

They reminded him of the buzz and excitement yesterday had brought and this new day promised. Anybody, it seemed, who hadn't caught yesterday's spectacle – and lot's who had – were back for more. **"Everybody's looking for you,"** they said to Jesus. They figured it was another splendid photo-op to give momentum to his kingdom campaign.

But again, it seems like Jesus is settling for less than everything he could have had. He turns his back on the opportunity to head back out to bask in the sunshine of an already adoring public and says:

**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 to make sure everybody knew that he meant what he'd said, Mark concludes:

**And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.**

In answer to our “What do you do after that?” question, Jesus answered without words by moving on from where he had been to where he was called to be. He spent his time doing the same stuff in the new places ... proclaiming the message, casting out demons, healing ....

Now, I’m not going to waste this sermon in the sort of self-servig observation that whenever my time at Nativity ends, I’ll be sort of doing what Jesus did. What a waste of a marvelous text that would be! Why? Because what’s in this text is about you who will remain at Nativity to welcome your new pastor. You can remember the enthusiasm of Capernaum’s crowds – and you’ll get to share your Spirit-led future together.

Just like these disciples we Nativity folk are called to follow Jesus. And we’ve obviously chosen to do. But we’ve also, just like the disciples, often fallen prey to the temptation to rest too long on yesterday’s laurels. There’s a lot inside of us that’s sorely tempted to do just that rather than boldly moving forward into the new faith ventures to which God calls us.

We might think of it this way as well: Isn’t it awfully tempting to use our gifts and abilities for our own self-promotion, rather than for the promotion of God’s coming reign? But guess what? We aren’t called – individually or as a congregation – to play that game. We dare not rest on yesterdays – or today’s – accomplishments.

All of us at Nativity need to open ourselves to the Spirit who sustains and equips us not to reflect on today’s or yesterday’s glory, but on tomorrow. Tomorrow’s tasks and opportunities. They’ll call us not to curry to the favors of adoring, appreciative crowds we might know, but to stretch out the hand of healing grace and hospitality to the crowds we don’t know yet.

All of that will be the focus this Wednesday evening’s gathering. Our Council and Call Committee members meet with Michele Hilton, Assistant to the Bishop for Administration. And you’re welcome to join us. That evening we’ll be called to realistically but also with faith in what God can do assess what God might be calling us to do and what the dimensions of your next pastor’s ministry and your renewed mission focus might be.

What we do know is this: that you’ve gotten the message. It’s today’s message that the kingdom’s “keep on keepin’ on” is not a trip to the comforts and splendor of the past, but a risky, exhilarating journey to the uncertainties of the future for this congregation and, indeed, for God’s reign in the world we share.

Just look at one tiny example. We're involved in a fiscal year of ministry operation in which we have one of the larger operating deficits in a long time. Some \$20,000 at the end of December. (Just like me to talk about money, right?) That could cause some who might choose a "gloom and doom" scenario to say, "time to tighten the belt, pull back initiatives, slim down the operation." And, to be sure, I've heard a voice or two around here sharing that message.

Well, I see a different "reality" ... one a lot closer to Capernaum's healings and demon exorcizings. I see a congregation who, last Epiphany, with some folk pledging less or continuing their pledges as well as those who offered a bold increase in theirs, chose to provide even more gifts than they expected. Almost 5% more. What a thrill to observe that!

Let me tell you, if you've been involved in leadership this past year ... or even just kept your eye on what's been happening at Nativity ... you know what an absolutely exhausting experience it's been here during the year. I mean nobody could complain about some just sitting back and taking it easy for a year.

No, not Nativity! What can we do after that? Well, we didn't choose to take a year off. We chose to sustain the bold venture we undertook by directing out council to establish and work with our new Strategic Planning Task Force. We've chosen to hold open the future for ministry expansion and opportunity in this congregation's future. And we've begun to ask the bold questions in conversations with our sisters and brothers and Gardens Presbyterian Church. You'll be seeing some wonderful new shared opportunities very soon.

But, well, what else could one expect?

This is a congregation that has heard the call to follow Jesus ... it's been with him in its own tempting and doubting Gardens of Gethsemane ... wondering with him whether God has forsaken it. It's been with him at its own painful crosses ... its own Calvary's. And, as for him, those have been neither phantoms of imagination or simple inconveniences or moments of discomfort for us. They've been times and moments to face the power of the Evil One ... of death itself, finally ... head on. But, thanks be to God, we've followed him to the open tomb and to the table of victory and hope. We can sense, finally, not God's absence but God's victorious presence in the new life of the kingdom where promise and grace, power and life prevail.

After all, what else could one expect?

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN.

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Soli Deo Gloria