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The church of four fishermen

The Holy Gospel for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany is from the Gospel according to Mark, the first chapter, beginning at the 29th verse.

And at once on leaving the synagogue, he went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed and feverish, and at once they told him about her. 31 He went in to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. 33 The whole town came crowding round the door, 34 and he cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another; he also drove out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

The Gospel of the Lord.

People of God, I'm glad you are gathering together today. It might be again an uncomfortable gathering—gathering in community but separately—sitting at our kitchen tables. Or perhaps gathering in our worship spaces but masked and 6 feet apart. So glad you pushed through the discomfort of these times to gather anyway. Let me center with you today on the Word. The Word that we have shared as church in good times, in hard times: in times of war, times of peace, times of growth and prosperity, times of uncertainty. I invite you to walk with me today into the Word that holds us. If you are at home today, I'd invite you to open your Bibles to the beginning of

the Gospel According to Mark where our text is found this morning. And dwell with me in that so deep, so beautiful Gospel. Mark chapter 1.

Please join with me in prayer:

*May these words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

First let me begin with a word about the Gospel according to Mark among the Gospels. In the Gospels we love The Good Samaritan story, the prodigal son story. We know them by heart. Both stories are in the Gospel according to Luke. Luke's gospel fires our imagination about a gracious God. In the Gospels, we love Matthew's gospel because in Matthew's Gospel Jesus gives us clear directions. In Matthew, Jesus tells the faith community about prayer, about love, about how to be church—even how to handle conflict step by step. But Mark. . .Mark's gospel is different.

Mark's gospel is often a puzzling narrative filled with unanswered questions. For example, as you make your way into Mark, often Jesus will heal someone and then command them in no uncertain terms to tell no one about it! Why Jesus would reject good advertising! And do you know what? For 2000 years theologians have been wondering why he said that. Various solutions have been suggested. But we still don't know. We are not quite sure what God is up to in the story. Maybe neither was Mark.

Maybe that is why I'm so drawn to this narrative—because in fact, our lives are so much like that aren't they? We are not always sure what God is up to in the events of our lives, of our world either. Maybe that is particularly the case in the last past year as we walk through this pandemic.

I'd invite you to turn to Mark chapter 1. As we begin, remember that the three similar Gospels, referred to collectively as the Synoptic gospels tell broadly a similar story of Jesus. Matthew Mark and Luke all share a simple geographical order. Each gospel speaks at length of Jesus' one-year ministry in Galilee—the north province of Palestine; then tells of his journey to Jerusalem for the last week of his ministry, from Palm Sunday through

Good Friday to Easter Day. So each Gospel presents a year in Galilee; then a week in Jerusalem. And each Gospel also includes a Prologue to give the readers a hint of where the story will go.

Turn for a moment to Mark's Prologue. To start with, notice what isn't there: no stable in Bethlehem, that's in Luke; no magi following the star, that's in Matthew. Mark's prologue is really brief. It is just 12 verses long and the first 8 verses are spent introducing John the Baptist. Verse 9 introduces Jesus and it does it like this:

It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.

That's it. Jesus just arrives a grown man from Nazareth in Galilee. He comes from Nazareth, which is to say, he comes from nowhere of importance as far as people knew—it's Jesus in blue jeans if that image helps you imagine it.

Then as you walk through chapter 1, he meets John the Baptist and is baptized. As the water runs down his body he hears the voice of God affirming that he is God's son and God is pleased with them. Then immediately following his baptism in verse 12, the Spirit drives him into the desert. Notice. . .the Spirit doesn't advise Jesus to go into the wilderness. The Spirit doesn't simply guide him to the wilderness. The Spirit drives him in the desert where Jesus remains for 40 days and is put to test by the Satan. Why does the Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness? Mark doesn't say.

Again, if you might be expecting a long conversation with the Satan tempting him to throw himself from the top of temple or turn stones into bread—it's not there. That's in Luke and Matthew. What does he go through in the desert? Mark doesn't say. What does the Satan say? Mark doesn't say. Just that he was driven into the lonely place and was tested for 40 days. Then this

And afterward the angels served him.

The Greek word for served here is *diakoneo*, the word behind our word “deacon.” The angels literally ministered to him. They served him so that he could continue the journey.

With the Prologue complete we move into the long Galilean ministry section that continues till chapter 11 when Jesus will enter Jerusalem. Mark says, verse 15, that Jesus went into Galilee and proclaimed this message:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.

What does the kingdom of God look like? Many groups in Jesus’ time were putting forward a way to the “kingdom of God,” to God’s new world. The Zealots called for an armed rebellion against the Roman overlords to bring in a new world. They wanted to storm the Capitol! The Essenes called the people to withdraw from the world into a colony and follow the Scripture together and wait for God’s Kingdom to break in. The Pharisees and Sadducees each had a plan for meeting the Kingdom of God, for God’s new world to break in. What does the kingdom of God Jesus proclaims look like? Mark doesn’t say.

But in the Galilean section, right at the outset, the narrative does clarify one thing about how that new world, that kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed was coming. Jesus immediately gathers together a community. The community he gathers is always surprising. It was not the religious leaders of the time, nor was it the most prominent secular leaders.

While Jesus was walking along by the Lake of Galilee, he meets two fishermen: Simon and Simon’s brother Andrew. Jesus calls them to follow him. Mark says:

And at once they left their nets and followed him.

It is the same story, just down the lakeshore, were two other fishermen, James and John. Jesus calls them as well and immediately get up and follow Jesus. Why did they find themselves following Jesus? Mark doesn't say. The fishermen don't tell us, either. Only that Jesus called them and they found themselves following after him.

I wonder if they were wondering what the Kingdom of God Jesus was announcing was going to look like, too. What were they being brought into? Were they going to be an army? Or a cloister? Or something else.

Now our Gospel text is located during one day of the life of this Church of Four Fishermen. The sabbath day begins with the church of four fishermen following Jesus into Capernaum where Jesus preaches in a synagogue. Mark says that the people marveled at his words. What did he teach? Mark doesn't say. Then after preaching Jesus meets a person we would describe as sick in body and mind and soul. Jesus heals him.

So from the outset, the little church of four fishermen are beginning to know what this Kingdom of God was going to be about: it would be about gathering and teaching and it was going to be about bringing healing to the broken and rejected.

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus and his church of four fishermen went to the home of Simon's mother-in-law. She was in bed with a fever. The church had said, "Jesus, is there something you can do for Simon's mother-in-law?" Does that sound familiar? The church of Jesus prays for each other. And yes, they didn't just pray, they go on the road with Jesus to where the need is.

Listen to what happens at the house. Mark in so few words tells it beautifully.

Jesus went in to her, took her by the hand, lifted her up, and the fever left her.

It was a ministry of presence. He went to see her. It was a ministry of touch. He “took her by the hand.” It was a ministry of healing: he “lifted her up.” The little church of four fishermen was learning that this kingdom of God Jesus was proclaiming was not about leading an uprising against the Romans. Nor was it withdrawing from the world. It would be about dwelling deeply in the world. It would be about “drawing near” to people. It would be about “lifting people up.” It would be about bringing healing.

Finally, the moment at the house closes so simply—you could almost miss it.

Then she served them.

The Greek word for “serving” here is *diakoneo*— the same word used for how the Angels ministered to Jesus after his 40-day temptation. Simon’s mother-in-law got up and did angels’ work—she ministered to Jesus and this little church of four fishermen--the church now of four fisherman and one mother-in-law.

The healed had become the healer. Those lifted up became those who lifted up others.

Finally, the day closes for the little church like this. The text reads:

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another; he also drove out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

People were gathering around this Jesus. He healed many. . .but just many—not all. Why was that? Why only some? Mark doesn’t say. Maybe he doesn’t know why either. Neither do we, come to think of it. Finally, Jesus

told them not to tell anyone about the healing. Why are they to tell no one? Mark doesn't say.

As the gospel story closes, I believe that the Word, this story, will take its place in your life and speak. It may speak to you today or much later—without comment from me. That is the way of the Word. It will have its way. But I would share one place where the story takes me in this particular time of our lives.

I'm struck today, by the unpredictable journey of the church of four fishermen. I'm so struck by the questions they are obliged to walk with. Why did Jesus tell those healed not to tell anyone? They don't know. Why were only some healed? They don't know. Why did Jesus choose simple down to earth fisherman to lead his church? They don't know that either.

The questions on the journey for people of faith are still here with us, aren't they? What is this pandemic all about? What are we learning from it? What is God doing in the middle of all this? But like the church of four fishermen, we find ourselves following Jesus down the road day by day.

Barbara Brown Taylor in *Gospel Medicine* shares this. She says,

*On Sunday mornings a great division takes place among American people: **some** go to church, and **most** stay home.*

She adds the ones who stay home just see no particular value in the church gathering on Sunday. It looks like an hour a Sunday that would be more efficiently used if you did something constructive: mow the grass, shovel the drive, learn a skill. But for us who gather, she says, we know something else. She continues:

This is how we learn how we fit.

This is how we locate ourselves between the past and the future; between our hopes and our fears, between the earth and the stars.

This is how we learn who we are and what we are supposed to be doing:

by coming together to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still,

by peering into the darkness together and telling each other what we will see when we do.

That's how important this following Jesus is for us. Isn't it!

I leave you the story of the church of four fishermen walking with Jesus. Walking each day learning how to be church. Walking each day with unexpected blessings and, yes, with unanswered questions.

But, I think, if you asked them about what walking with Jesus meant. . .they would say. . .“Everything.”

Everything.

As do we.

Amen.