

Sunday, February 8, 2015: Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Once a month I travel down to Weston, Massachusetts to attend a get-together with other clergy newly ordained and working in the Diocese. It is time to foster community while helping and supporting each other as we enter a new phase in our individual ministries—this a part of my formation process. Outside of the soul-crushing commute on the 95/128, I look forward to this time; it is precious quiet time, when I am not riding my horn.

One of the components I enjoy most is the Bible study or rather meditation on Scripture we do every month. The format for this meditation is the same every month. We take turns reading the gospel passage appointed for the upcoming Sunday aloud to the group. We read it through out loud three times, taking time in-between to reflect and share what speaks to us. First we share the words that stand out, followed by a phrase or reflection that resonates with us, and concluding with what the passage might mean in our ministry.

The process serves a few purposes. It is a means of theological reflection, it is a Bible study that does not take much preparation, and finally it can serve as an aid to those that will be preaching on that Gospel message, very practical.

As I find my voice in the role I am presently in, I relish these opportunities like this to explore new things that might bolster my abilities. I am reminded that in all our ministries we are growing in what we do and hopefully growing closer to God. As Christians we are compelled to continue to learn, to share, and to grow. This is a part of my process and so I share some of my process with you as I reflect upon the scripture appointed for today—you are a part of my journey so I share with you now to not draw your attention away from the Word of God but rather to open a window into the meaning of Mark's understating of the life of Jesus. I do imagine that many of you engage in similar methodologies when reading the Holy Scriptures in private devotional time. That what you do is useful and fruitful as a means to gain insight and deepen faith.

So, I went through this exercise this week of reading the Gospel message three times, while also taking time in-between to reflect and make the occasional notation. What stood out for me in the first run through and that I underlined immediately were the words "synagogue" and "fever." Not only did the words stand out for me, they are important elements in this passage from Mark.

The synagogue referred to here is in the town of Capernaum—a town in what we know as northern Israel along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. I know it is in Capernaum because it is mention in the previous versus but that I have been to this location and read this passage before. Reminded still of the first time I read this passage after having been to Israel. This town is in a region where Jesus did the bulk of his earthly ministry and miracle making. It is also a place where for me, Jesus of the Scriptures moved from the theoretical Jesus to the real-life, earthly Jesus. It was while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that I came to the ancient town of Capernaum and visited the synagogue that sits in ruin, a synagogue that dates back to the time of Jesus. The synagogues that Jesus would have spoken in, the place he caste out a demon mention a few versus earlier. The Church believes that this is the synagogue mention in Mark. When I visited this location with my group it was easy for me to be transported back two

thousand years. There are no high-rise hotels dotting the coast line in this area. The shoreline is unadulterated with obvious signs of modernity... The hillsides still hold grazing land and the Sea of Galilee is still a place where fishermen catch fish with nets. For many Christians this place is a sacred place. It is a special and sacred place for me. These sylvan hills that surrounded the sea and the town of Capernaum were the mission field of our Savior had its start. I can visualize this place even now... More importantly, for me, for the first time in this land did the mythical Jesus become the flesh and blood Jesus. The setting made sense; I had a physical context to place him in. It was a transformational experience. Much in the way, I imagine those people that witnessed the healing in the synagogue and hearing this radical message heard from the lips of Jesus would have experienced.

Fever was the second word that struck me in this passage. In the Gospel of Mark, Peter's mother-in-law was healed of a fever, a great fever, as described in Luke's Gospel account. Fever was and still is a cause for alarm. In pre-antibiotic times this was even more so. Every time I read this passage I am drawn in because years ago I was stricken with fever as a result of getting malaria while working in southern Madagascar. My bouts with malaria were epic, the fevers crippling. In those moments where there seemed to be no end and no-relief, I prayed to God to spare my life or take my life. So I too sit with Peter's mother-in-law in her fever-filled ash heap every time I read this passage.

My next read-through, keeping in mind the two words previously extricated, was focused on what the importance, if any, were placed in these words by either the Gospel writer or Jesus. Moving beyond my personal connection to them—how did the synagogue of Capernaum and the description of crippling fever factor into Jesus' ministry and most importantly, how does it inform our understanding of this story.

Capernaum in the Gospel of Mark is not the place where Jesus ministers exclusively but as a base, he does come back here in his ministry but he is on the move again to another area in the region. There was much to be done in Christ's ministry on earth and here we get a sense of the urgency. In that He very well could have remained and continued his dialogue with those in that town and healed more of the sick. It is possible that he did all of that work he could, with in a population of that size.

When his work is done in the synagogue he returns with his disciples to one of their homes, where the ministry of the word does not stop. Ministry continues in this context. It is not enough for Jesus to speak and heal in the synagogue, something in time that will put him at odds with the religious authorities; he brings it into the home. Ministering and being ministered to is not done exclusively in a place of worship.

As I look to the women healed of her fever I follow that thread—to ponder what this act of healing meant. Healing by the Son of God brings true life into the world. This woman here is a part of a spectrum of the miracles of healing found in Mark, where people are healed—those stricken with leprosy, raised from the dead, made physically whole...What makes this miracle special is that Peter's mother-in-law needed no time to convalesce, no rest was needed or time to adjust to restored health. She was made whole. She served her guests, she served Jesus.

But here Jesus did not tell her to remain silent about what had happened as found in...nor did he send her out to proclaim the word as in... or ask her to join him like he did earlier in this chapter. She remained. She served where she served before. Her ministry was where she was and as far as we know remained planted there in her home.

Upon my third read and before I then ventured into reading Mark from the beginning of Chapter One, as well as consulting other reference sources, I was struck by the importance of time in this story. Jesus moves from the Synagogue to a home, he is always on, he is always ministering. After time in prayer and away from the crowds, he announces that he must move on. He very well could have discerned in this prayer time as described by Mark prayer that this was what his father wanted.

Jesus very well could have been what many of the people wanted, a courtly, priestly Messiah. The synagogue of Capernaum could have been the perfect place where a following could swell and he could proclaim from a place of institutional importance his message. Instead, the founding and dissemination of what he had to say could not and would not be contained by a place, whether it is a synagogue or a town. His message could be found on the shoreline, along the road, at a well, in a private home, in a courtroom, on a cross. There is much to learn in the synagogue, but there is work to be done in the home!

In this Gospel Mark there is a sense of the importance of time. This Gospel account gets into the meat of Jesus' time on earth. What is recorded of his early life is almost non-existent. We have his baptism by John, time in the wilderness, and the calling of his first disciples before he comes to Capernaum. That is it, no wise men, no stories of a young Jesus in the temple lecturing or for that matter working in Joseph's trade. It is preaching, ministry, acts of love, travel, prayer, and sacrifice that we get from Mark.

This leads me to the third reading of the passage and what speaks to me in terms of ministry in the present. I came away with a better understanding of what it means to serve from the woman with the fever. There are ever so many ways to serve and this woman continued to do what she did before. Unlike the men in her life, these fishermen, she did not throw down her nets and follow Jesus. She remained and represented Jesus, serving as an anchor of faith where the word of God had been brought. I was always blown away at this group of men who left something they spent their lives doing to start something radically new. But reading this story with different eyes I was struck by the obedience and conviction to stay where one is and to minister in the places that are familiar. Peter's mother-in-law, I so much want to give her a name, for me showed the power to remain and proclaim the glory of God without the drama and fanfare as her husband and her friends did. We all have different ministries and can serve the table in a multitude of ways, as we will see as this Gospel unfolds. We can remain where we are and serve Jesus with intentionality and impact, as equally as we can drop everything like disciples did and rush off to foreign lands.

Epiphany means to "show," to "make known," to "reveal," to "make God manifest." Epiphany is a season where we can allow God to grow in us. This Gospel message is about just this—revealing the truth, the hope. We have a God manifest bringing a slice of life eternal through his message and healing. It is fitting that in this season of Epiphany that here at St John's we have hosted various

outreach organization that are out-and-about ministering to the needs of the most vulnerable and doing so locally. We remain here in our community, yet we are doing so outside our synagogue, our place of worship.

The process that I shared with you here and that I do with my colleagues has illumined the Scriptures for me. Finding ways to connect, place our self in the text can also be fruitful, even if it connects our pain with the pain or past or present challenges with others. Empathy can be a useful tool and practice in our own spiritual growth. It is an effort to connect with the story, to connect with the experience, to connect to God. I encourage you to find ways, if you do not do so, to engage the text. This I not an easy thing to do and can foster challenges to our faith. But we are to test it, question it... to wrestle with it. Faith is an empty vessel without it.

Amen