

EPIPHANY 5B 07-02-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 40.21-31; Psalm 147. 1-11; 1 Corinthians 9.16-23;

*Mark 1. 29-39*

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. 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. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

Mark, in the first chapter of his gospel, describes a day in the life of Jesus and his first disciples. Last week we heard that at the beginning of this Sabbath day, they went to the synagogue in Capernaum and Jesus taught the congregation. He also healed a troubled man, which impressed people no end.

Straight after this, Jesus, James and John went back with Simon and Andrew to their house. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed, and Jesus healed her as well.

That evening, people came from everywhere, bringing their sick and disturbed friends and relatives so Jesus could heal them- and we are told he cured many of them. Who knows what time they finally got to bed.

Jesus got up early in the morning, while it was still very dark, and went out to a deserted place to pray. We don't know what the time of year was, so we can't guess when sunrise would have been; but if, as the writer tells us, it was still very dark, it must have been extremely early. Jesus didn't have a sleep-in, even though he'd had such a full-on day.

The gospels tell us that Jesus did take time to rest, although sometimes he was interrupted by the needs of others. But by telling us this story of a day in Jesus' ministry right at the beginning of his gospel the writer sets the pace for the following 15 chapters.

Mark writes with a sense of urgency. He is always saying things like 'Immediately', 'at once', 'as soon as', giving the impression that Jesus was a man in a hurry- a man on a mission, which of course he was. Most scholars think Jesus had around three years from the beginning of his ministry to his death; three years is not a long time.

When we read about healing miracles like this, we can find ourselves wondering- why doesn't Jesus always heal the people we pray for? Where's MY miracle when I need one?

It sounds so easy for Jesus; he went up to Simon's mother-in-law, held her hand, and helped her get up. She was well enough to get lunch for everyone. Then when the crowds turned up later, he cured a whole load more people.

Yet we have people on our prayer list for weeks, months- years; and we have all prayed for people who have not recovered.

“The problem with miracles,” theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by.”

We try to explain it away, and say helpful things like, “God is using this sickness to build your character.” “It’s a test — stay strong!” “You need to have more faith.” “Maybe there’s some secret sin in your life — have you tried confession?” “God’s timing is different from ours — just be patient.” “It’s all part of God’s plan”.

These kind of comments, however well-intended, are insensitive and hurtful to people who are already suffering. Still, we are left asking: where are the miracles?

There are people who have experienced healing that seems nothing short of miraculous, even if modern medicine has been involved; but they are few. Why?

We can't know the answer to these questions, but we do know that the Gospels only record about three dozen of Jesus’s miracles altogether. In this week’s story, the “whole city” came to Jesus, and he healed “many” — not all. Though the crowds continued to look for him the morning after he healed Simon’s mother-in-law, he left them unhealed and left town.

In short, Jesus only healed a small number of people in one tiny part of the world before he died. He came to proclaim the kingdom of God, not to eliminate the world's disease and despair.

We have come to expect good health and wellbeing as if by right, and we are shocked and angered when sickness and death invade our comfortable worlds. Life has not always been like this, and still isn’t for many. For most of human history life has been precarious, and if you managed to survive infancy you were doing well.

As we experience this most recent global pandemic we are reminded that plagues have swept the world before, and will again. Fire and flood, so-called ‘natural’ and human-made disasters are part of our history. The world can be a dangerous place.

We have to learn to live with the mystery of the “already-and-the-not-yet.” Yes, the kingdom of God has already come, and its inbreaking during Jesus’s time on earth was marked by all kinds of signs and wonders. I believe this.

And yet, those signs and wonders are not my daily reality. Someday, somehow, all will be well, but all is not well yet.

So the great task, the great sorrow, the great journey, our great calling, is to live graciously and compassionately in this vast and often terrible in-between.

We offer those who suffer the comfort of our steady presence, our practical assistance, and our prayers. We do all we can to create and restore community, family, and dignity to those who walk through this life sick, weak, and wounded.

We continually proclaim the Good News in our words and actions and the way we live our lives.

For even though we live in this in-between time, the now-and-not-yet, we live in hope because we are Resurrection people. We know that God loves us through life, death and beyond.

The Lord be with you.