

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

The gospel of Mark gets right to the point. The shortest of the four gospels, it has no flowery nativity scene explaining the circumstances of Jesus' birth. There is no long history of genealogy to connect Jesus to the House of David as heir to David's throne. And there are no wise men who appear after their long journey from the East to confirm the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Mark doesn't bother with all the explanations that pave the way for introducing Jesus. He just jumps right in telling us not only who Jesus is and what Jesus does, but why Jesus is here with us.

Because Jesus is who he is, he knows how human beings function. He knows what we need and he knows how far we have strayed from God's intended purpose for us. There are any number of things that we know about ourselves: we know that we need to eat nutritious food on a regular basis; we know that we need to exercise often; we know that we need to sleep regularly; we know that we need other human beings around us; we know that we have emotional needs that cover not only needing the company of other humans, but also receiving love, acceptance and forgiveness from them in order to feel 'well' or 'whole.' We also know that we need to feel some sense of purpose in life. We have discovered, all on our own, in one way or another, that life is bleak without a sense of community or togetherness or belonging and a sense of calling or sense of usefulness.

Jesus has come to be with us in order to model for us how we should behave toward God and toward each other. He has come to teach us about God's will for us and to correct a number of misperceptions we have about God. And he has come to proclaim the Good News. We hear that phrase a lot when we're talking about Jesus...proclaiming the Good News. So if someone were to ask you, "Exactly what is the Good News that Jesus has come to proclaim?" What would you say? Would you have a ready answer or would you hem and haw just a bit? When you hear that phrase yourself...what comes to mind for you? What is the Good News for you? If Jesus has come to proclaim the Good News...to show us and to teach us...about the Good News, what exactly is he doing or saying? The Good News isn't just about us...it's for all of God's creation, because God loves everything and everybody that God created. We seem to lose sight of that sometimes...much of the time, actually!

Jesus shows us almost immediately that he has come to tell us about God and he has come to serve us. Those are two habits of his that he wants us to replicate: teaching about God and

servicing others. In the community and social structure in which Jesus is working, the idea of servitude is not one that is held in high esteem. That's a tough idea for Jesus to sell. The servants were at the bottom of the social order, but Jesus showed us by his very actions that service to others is highly prized by God. In Jesus' world, serving others is not only a lowly designation in the social structure, it is also gender specific. Men were not servants unless they were enslaved or hired. The ones doing the serving in normal households were always women. It was hard for the males that listened to Jesus to get on board with the concept of serving where they were concerned. They were accustomed to being pretty high in the social structure and no one voluntarily moves to the bottom. But that's what Jesus taught them and that's what Jesus modelled for them. "Be of service to others," he said, in his actions as well as his words. Part of Jesus' mission was to create a people who had been raised up to serve each other. That's God's plan and design for us...that we should be of service to one another.

The Good News is also about the restoration of God's creation. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' first act of ministry is to cast out a demon who possessed a man. The demon prevented the man from being himself. Jesus restored the man to his rightful self as he cast the demon out. Restoration. That's part of the Good News. Making things that have been compromised or broken whole again. That includes individual people as well as whole communities...indeed the whole of creation.

So the Good News is about restoration...making things and people as God had intended for them to be in the first place. Jesus casts out those evil spirits that are opposed to God's people...those things which lay them low and interfere with their lives. Jesus comes to restore his power is sufficient to do it. Jesus' casting out of evil spirits and his healing of physical ailments liberates people from whatever forces are holding them back and he returns them to their normal life and routines.

Even if we haven't been physically ill lately many of us feel like we've been taken over by evil spirits. All of us are longing to be liberated from the lockdowns of the pandemic and to be returned to our normal life and routines. We are keenly and painfully aware right now that our lives are out of synch with the way we believe they should be. We are longing for our normal lives to be restored to us. In our longing for restoration, perhaps our prayers should include a restoration of our lives the way God wants them to be rather than the way they were. Our lives have been forever altered. Why don't we focus on making changes that reflect God's will for us so that our 'new' lives and our new routines will give us a better chance to live the lives God intended for each of us? We have a great opportunity here!

In our gospel lesson this morning, when Jesus enters Simon's house and discovers his mother-in-law lying in bed sick with a fever, Jesus takes her by the hand and raises her up and the fever departs. Jesus showed us what a powerful part human touch plays as an element in healing.

And she was restored to her rightful place in her own community when she began serving them. That was her gift to her community and part of the identity she had that made her feel whole.

As much as Jesus seemed to feel satisfied in restoring others to physical health, Jesus knew that such restoration was only part of his message. It was a powerful part, to be sure, but Jesus knew that the task of restoration of human beings and of creation itself would require him to stay on the move. It would also require him to be respectful of the human body he occupied while he was here with us. He knew what he needed to do to keep that human body functioning well so that he could proclaim the Good News of God. After a very busy day of exorcizing demons and curing physical ailments, Jesus slipped away by himself while it was still dark and spent time in prayer with God. Jesus needed that connection with God, just as we do. It helped to replenish his own energy and to restore his own human body which must have become exhausted from time to time. It shouldn't be lost on us that Jesus actually came into the world while the world was still dark and alone and in need of restoration. And Jesus himself is the light that dispelled that darkness.

So if someone were to ask you, "What exactly is the Good News?" think about what Jesus said to his disciples when they found him in that deserted place: "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." Jesus' message was to model for us how God wanted us to behave and to restore the parts of us that were broken or damaged in some way...and to get that word out!!

The Good News is a little different for every person and for every community and even for every church. Jesus asks us: "What do you need to be restored to you so that you are whole again the way God intended?" That will be different for each one of us individually and for all of us in community. What does our community need to be restored in order to be whole as God intended? What needs to be restored to our Church in order to be whole as God intended it to be? Jesus looks us right in the eye and says to us, "What do you need?" or "How can I make you whole?" or "Do you want to be healed?" The desire to be restored is within all of us, but some of us are a little hesitant. What we need for that restoration to happen is known only by God and by Jesus, but we need to be willing for it to be provided to us. It's a little bit different for each one of us.

The Good News is God's love for all creation...most especially for his children...and that is every human being on the planet...including you! The Good News is that God wants to restore everything in creation that isn't functioning now as it was intended...which includes *all* the human beings. Without fanfare or elaborate introduction, Jesus jumps right into his ministry restoring the man who was possessed and healing Simon's mother-in-law along with countless

people who stood at her door waiting for the restoration they knew Jesus could provide for them.

The Good News is that we can be restored and that we need never be separated from the love of God, our Creator. As Jesus seeks to heal, we need to be willing to receive that restoration. The God who created us and loves us will hold us close for all eternity. All we need to do is say "Yes!"

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.