

“At Once” Mark 1: 29-39 Rev. Janet Chapman 2/4/14

There are weeks when the readings chosen for each Sunday’s preaching resonate well with everyday life in ways that feel mysterious and relevant for me. And then there are weeks when something tragic happens and I just want to throw out all the prescribed texts and just sit and moan like David did, “Why have you abandoned us, O God? Why have you turned your face against me?” I will let you guess which this particular week has been. If, at some point in the next few minutes this doesn’t go as planned, we might just end up doing that. Still I opened up the Marcan text and revisited it again on Friday to see if there was any hope of redemption, and verses 30 and 31 struck me like a ton of bricks: “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.” You have got to be kidding me, I thought. For the past six weeks, our congregation has been praying fervently for healing for Joanne and now Jesus goes to Simon’s house, learns that his mother-in-law is sick and heals her instantly. In our life today, there are so many people we love that are not being cured. And the text goes on to report that as word spreads concerning the miraculous healing, the “whole city” gathers outside Simon’s door, and Jesus “cures many who are sick with various diseases, and casts out many demons.” I’ll be honest with you, right now this passage feels cruel, or if not downright cruel, then at least inaccessible. What are we supposed to do with Jesus’ healing stories, here, today, now? Is it just me, or have things changed so drastically since Jesus walked the earth over 2000 years ago ushering in God’s realm with miraculous signs and wonders that sometimes it is hard to relate? Where has all the magic gone?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The problem with miracles is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering.

Everyone one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by.” Last Tuesday night when I walked into the ER at Mercy, I was unprepared for what I saw. The last time I saw Joanne the previous Thursday she was doing so much better, talking on her own, breathing on her own, cracking wisecracks, and looking forward to getting back to life as she knew it. But instead she now laid in bed, semi-catatonic and declining rapidly. Miracles are hard to come by but my prayer at that moment was “God. if there is a miracle to be had here, we sure will take it.” I reflected to myself that there are some Christians who, being faced with such a reality, will demand miracles, who will not only expect them but feel they deserve them - I have never been one of those. There are some who promise miracles – “Send me/my church/my ministry money, and God will heal you for sure!” Others try to theorize about sickness by turning it back on the one suffering, “God is using this sickness to build your character...God’s timing is different from ours-just be patient...Satan is testing you – stay strong!” Besides being insensitive and hurtful, as Debie Thomas points out, these comments encourage us to assume that health, wholeness, and comfort are the norms we should expect to experience in this lifetime. Physical and emotional pain, chronic illnesses, and even the untimely death of a 50 year old are an abomination to folks who project such messages. Seeking to escape reality rather than learn to cope within it, is it any wonder that people flock to churches that promise prosperity, supernatural healings, and virtual happiness Sunday after Sunday? Why not grab hold of the magic if it is out there to claim? Why not demand the glitter and spectacle?

Don’t get me wrong – I love some of the healing stories in the Gospels. I love the power and compassion with which Jesus touches the sick and the suffering, restoring them to their

families, communities, and vocations. The tender touch of Jesus brings results, immediate results, which don't always require a certain amount of faith. Mark is a Gospel where things happen quickly – just the word “immediately” appears 33 times in his Gospel, more than anywhere else in the Bible. There is a sense of urgency, a quick rush of activity, moving Jesus from obscurity to fame almost at once. Mark's Gospel is sort of like Reality TV – it is Reality Gospel as it depicts for us a day in the life of our Savior. Yet what it misses as do the other Gospels is some of the less dramatic stories. It makes one wonder were there ever days where miracles didn't abound and believers didn't flock to Jesus' side? Did Jesus ever, for instance, visit a sick woman, take her hand, and offer only the comfort of his presence? Did he ever tell a chronically ill child, “I can't take away your pain, but I love you, and I'll try my best to help you bear it?” Did he ever encounter an unclean spirit he didn't or couldn't cast out? Did he ever sit in the dark with a profoundly depressed man – just sit? Did he ever keep vigil at a deathbed and cry with the family as they said goodbye? No resurrection – just tears?

Needless to say, we can't know the answer to all these questions. Logic tells us that such common place events wouldn't have drawn the attention of the Gospel writers and therefore wouldn't have been recorded. We know that the Gospels only record about three dozen of Jesus' miracles altogether. In today's story, the “whole city” came to Jesus, and he healed “many” but it doesn't say he healed all. Though the crowds continued to look for him the morning after he healed Simon's mother-in-law, the text notes that he immediately left town – again that urgency to keep on the go and presumably there were some that he left unhealed. 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 realm of God among us, not to eliminate the world's

diseases and despair. And unlike us, he never glamorized healing – if anything, he seemed a bit embarrassed by all the attention the miracles attracted, as if they were beside the point. Most of the time, he told people to keep their healings and exorcisms quiet. What do you think that was all about? Could it be that this means we are the ones who have turned Jesus into some kind of magician? Pastor Debie Thomas believes that if we look more carefully, we'll find a Messiah who is much more mysterious, elusive, subtle and quiet than our consumerist and quick-fix culture wants to follow. She prods us to take a look at the Jesus of verse 35 who eludes the crowds, seeks out deserted places, prays in the dark, and hides from his disciples, so much so that they have to go out and “hunt” for him. Clearly, this isn't a Jesus who will appeal to the supernatural faith healers or prosperity-focused preachers. But he is the Jesus of the Gospels.

With Jesus' birth on earth, the realm of God was opened up to all people at once, immediately without hesitation. It was marked by all kinds of signs and wonders – I do believe this and yet those signs and wonders are not part of my daily reality. Someday, somehow, all will be well, but all is not well yet. So the great task, the great sorrow, the great calling, the great journey is for us to live graciously and compassionately in this vast and often terrible in-between time. You and I are called to stand at the bedside of others and cry with them, hold their hands, offer comfort and presence. We are to refrain from making promises that are not ours to make. We are to create and restore community, family, and dignity to those who must walk through this life grieving the death of loved one, battling a sickness, and struggling through weakness - all without cures. And to make sure that no one who has to die – and ultimately that is all of us, in the end – has to die alone and unloved if we can help it. There

may be some of us who are holding out for magic, believing that somehow magic is more difficult and therefore the better alternative, the more worthy option. But it isn't – magic is easy; it is the easy way out, the shortcut. It is mystery which is hard; the not knowing is so much harder on our limited existence. Living well in this tension between past and future, between the past good news which came to us in the birth of Immanuel, God with us, and the future good news that there will be an end to mourning and death – that is what is hard. It is mysterious, and mystery is where we find the Messiah; mystery is where we find God.

Therefore, as hard as it is to stomach, I guess I will dwell for awhile in our scripture, and find the courage somehow to be open to, and act upon, God's mysterious good news therein. Thanks be to God.