

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Lent
Year C

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Text: Mark 1:29-32

Title: “The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus—The Healing Ministry”

It’s not difficult to find heartbreaking news that can change our mood in a hurry if we allow it. Headlines often seem to place a higher value on reporting what is wrong with the world than on what is right with it. Just this morning I turned on the computer and the headline was: “7 die in ‘random’ Michigan shootings; suspect held”. Apparently, a man in Kalamazoo drove around randomly taking peoples’ lives, people he apparently didn’t even know.

We read or hear them all the time: stories of brokenness, stories of hurt, stories that make it clear that all is not well in the world. Sometimes those stories intersect with our lives. Sometimes they don’t, but they can have an impact on us nonetheless. I wonder if you would agree with me that if these kinds of stories were all we chose to hear in life, we’d be convinced we’re all doomed, that cruelty and conflict are the primary forces in life and there is no hope. What is a person to do?

After Jesus’ resurrection, the early church was taking shape in the generation that followed. The news then was no better than it is now. The Gospel According to Mark, scholars say was written after 70 A.D. That was the year the Roman army under the command of Vespasian, captured Jerusalem from Jewish rebels and completely destroyed the sacred Temple. For weeks Jewish residents and the armed Zealots revolting against the Romans were besieged. Josephus, a Jewish historian who also lived through those times, wrote about them. Some of his chapter titles in his work, Wars of the Jews, might have served as headlines:

- Monday: “The miseries of the Jews increase—The Romans make an assault upon the tower of Antonius”
- Tuesday: “Titus orders the tower of Antonia to be destroyed—Josephus Exhorts the Jews to surrender”
- Wednesday: “Strategems of the Jews against the Romans—Further account of the famine within the city.”
- Thursday: “Destruction of the Temple” and “Distress of the Jews upon the destruction of the Temple.”
- Friday: “Titus celebrates his father’s and brother’s birthday by slaughtering many of the Jewish captives.”

The headlines may change, but human nature certainly hasn't. The Bible calls it sin. The Bible could have seen a hopeless world as those who shared the Word lived through those headlines. They could have lived listening to the stories of the evil forces driving human nature and given up hope. But the Bible shares another story. Jesus offered the kind of sight that could see **good news in the midst of bad headlines**; the kind of hearing that could listen for God's voice in the midst of the heartbreaking clamor; the kind of heart that could feel the presence of the living God even as the great stone walls of the Temple were knocked down.

The story the Gospel According to Mark hears and shares is of a man who begins his work in small towns and rural areas. Doesn't start with the big cities and the powerful people. Begins his preaching with people in towns like Crump or Auburn. A stretch away from where all the action is—as those who enjoy urban living like to say.

It begins in Capernaum, beautiful little village on the Via Maris, the I75 of Jesus' day, connecting the East to the West. Sitting on the slopes that rise from the edge of the lake, wherever you are in the village there's a great view of the lake called Galilee.

We hear in Mark that they were headed for Peter's house. As soon as they get there, Jesus is told that Peter's mother-in-law is sick. Flu going around—or something. Had her in bed, tethered to the bathroom. Jesus walks into the room, takes her hand and somehow—mysteriously--her energy is restored. His touch brings healing to her, and in response she serves them. An appropriate response when receiving a gift from God.

Whenever the presence of God is realized, felt, known, something happens. Life changes for the one who has been healed of whatever it is that brings a fever, that saps life energy and keeps a person down. The very presence of Jesus changes the way we experience life. The presence of Jesus brings life as God intends it to be, not as the headlines report it to be.

One young man lived near the World Trade Center in September of 2001. Day after day he walked past a banner that had been created by the United Methodist Church after the attack on the Towers. (Ask for the slide.) One day in his churning grief he read the banner. The print is too small for you to read but it reads: "Fear is not the only force at work in the world today."

Over time, reading that message changed him. At one point, it compelled him to return to his faith and to find grace and new life through it. That banner was there because of Igniting Ministry, a marketing kind of evangelism our denomination has used as a tool to tell a different story. You may have also seen commercials by our denomination. They are messages in the national media reminding people that the Lord is present in ways that bring healing, not hurt. The intent is to provide people with a different message than that so often shared through other media sources because we see and trust Jesus. That message is shared only because of people like you. Every time you give we give and we preach the message through the media. We're preaching—all of us. Collectively, we're reminding the world of Jesus' message: "The reign of God is near. Turn around and believe the good news!" We are reminding the world that Jesus heals.

It is tempting though to forget why we do what we do. For example, why drag yourself and your kids out of bed on Sunday morning to come to Sunday school and worship? Why come to worship when things seem so bad? Why give to the church when I can give to United Way and other service organizations that help people? It's easy to slip into a sort of spiritual amnesia.

A friend of mine sent an email about a church goer who wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday:

"I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all."

This started a real controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone finally wrote this closer:

"I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this ... They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

Jesus heals people. Over and over again, he heals the sick in mind and body, but when we read his story of healing and teaching and feeding, he also has another habit. Jesus goes off to pray, to stay in touch with the one relationship he placed above all others. Even when the disciples came looking for him, reporting that people were hunting for him--no doubt to perform more miracles--he would not be deterred from his mission.

"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."

Staying in touch with God was **his primary purpose**. Spreading the good news that amidst the forces of conflict and cruelty in the world, the Spirit of God is present to bring healing and wholeness was **his primary mission**.

I don't know about you but I want to be part of a church that has passionate hope in the presence of Jesus healing the world. I want to be part of a congregation that embodies the message that fear is not the only force at work in the world. I want to be part of a congregation that serves in ways that remind the world and ourselves that Jesus is a healer because there is so much brokenness in the world. So Live your life in hope--passionate hope--that God is present and real and moving among us and within us. Live so others will know that "Fear is not the only force at work in the world."

Since, we are baptizing a child in the second service this morning and the sacrament is a sign of God's presence and our hope, I want to close with a devotion written for children in a book, Jesus Calling for Kids. The scripture focus comes from a verse in the letter to the Colossians: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15).

"Not only does this world change, but it is a world filled with sin. The

people around you are going to make mistakes. Your feelings will get hurt. You are going to mess up. If you count on this world—or the people in it—to make you happy and give you peace, sooner or later you will be disappointed. True, never-ending Peace can come only from Me. Ask Me to fill your heart with My Love and Peace. I will never disappoint you."
(Jesus Calling for Kids by Sarah Young)