

“Warp Speed Gospel” – Mark 1:29-39

Talk about a “whirlwind tour”! In preaching on this text from Mark’s gospel I feel like we should have some pre-game hype like they will at huge sporting events like today’s Super Bowl. You know the kind of glitz: bands marching, cheerleaders gyrating, and an announcer’s voice booming out “ARE YOU READY??!!” I feel we should approach today’s gospel reading with this atmosphere because of the dizzying pace of changes in locations and details in the text. If you don’t understand why I feel this way, let’s rip through it again together: exit the synagogue then zap! You’re at the house; four fast names speed by in a blur (no peeking, there will be a test!); discover Simon’s ill mother-in-law; observe a quick miraculous healing; watch as everybody digs into a full-blown meal; now replacing the gentle sounds of evening the cacophony of the entire city beats upon the door; we see a flash of Jesus curing and casting out demons; suddenly it’s morning and Jesus has gone missing; Simon and the boys form a search party; there’s a confrontation between Jesus and the new disciples; and then Jesus (and presumably the whole gang) tromp throughout the whole of Galilee preaching and performing exorcisms! WHEW! Did I miss anything? All of that, in only eleven short verses!

No wonder the poor disciples were confused ... at least confused as they always are portrayed in Mark’s gospel. Naturally, by the time we get to the later versions from Matthew and Luke those intimate followers of Jesus get a lot better press, but here in Mark’s gospel as everything happens “immediately” they are shown as not being able to keep up with the developing story. Mind you, once we get to the end of Mark’s gospel we do see why he has painted them as being so confused. It’s only with the flash of understanding at the cross that the disciples – and the world – finally come to understand the meaning of the events that have unfolded over the past few years.

Maybe we can use that understanding about the sudden realization of God’s glory in Jesus to work the process backwards. Knowing that Jesus will eventually be revealed on the cross as the messiah, let’s come back to this text and see if it can be less confusing as we look at it – but s-l-o-w-l-y, this time! The dizziness from our first reading gives us a clue that we might have experienced a form of “spacial dislocation” – that psychological effect that designers of roller coasters and other thrill rides invoke to add excitement to the ride. The effect comes from rapidly shifting locations or views so fast that the brain can’t quite keep up. However, as we slow down we can begin to identify those shifts, and a pattern emerges.

Going slowwwwwly, now, we begin to notice that there are four identifiable scenes in these few short verses: Simon’s house with his sick mother; Simon’s house with a large crowd being healed; a deserted place where Jesus prayed; finally, all of Galilee. There, that doesn’t seem so bad, does it? We might also note now that we’re replaying it in slow-mo that the whole episode is bracketed by beginning at a synagogue and ending at synagogues (one might even argue from this that perhaps Mark was suggesting Jesus only found himself spiritually when he was “outside the church” ... we’ll look at that in a bit.)

And did you notice another fascinating pattern emerging from identifying the four short scenes here? Seeing that pattern becomes a little clearer if we had started reading a bit before this, where Jesus is teaching in the synagogue from which they had just departed. The synagogue was a very public place; by contrast Simon’s house is a fairly private setting, at least while it’s just the boys and Simon’s mom, now healed so she could get back to work and serve them. Once the word got out, however, Simon’s house became a very public place, with the “whole city” crowding the door. And then, “In the morning, while it was still very dark” (wow, can you hear the Easter resurrection theme there? That intro makes you want to keep going with, “Mary rose quietly and made her way to the place where they had buried Jesus) ... but back to our current reading ... Jesus sneaks off to a deserted (i.e. very private) place. And finally, we’re back in Galilee doing the synagogue circuit, a very public setting. Public; private; public; private; public. No wonder we had whiplash!

Ok, so we’ve begun to make some sense out of the way Mark has put all of this together, now how does that help us to be not-so-confused disciples? We are helped by several really interesting

lessons that we can derive from this passage. To begin, the private-public pattern gives us a clue not only about how Jesus saw his role in serving but also about his need for physical and spiritual recovery. We sometimes (often?) worry if we're not "out there" full blast, max throttle, all the time with our faith. This episode reveals clearly that Jesus did the very public thing, but he also used more private time for deeper connections. Perhaps at this stage of his ministry it was only in the private places that Jesus could "touch the hand" of a woman sick with fever and not be shunned for being now unclean himself.

A further point that emerges is that Jesus spends time alone in prayer. Now there's a model for our own spiritual growth and well-being. If the one who was One with God needed a quiet time/place to listen for what God had to say, then surely we need it at least as much if not more! Communal prayer, as we gather for worship, is right and good and pleasing to God, but there is also a need for us to find that quiet space where we are alone with God, listening for the "still, small voice." The disciples seem to have missed that message, for they are not yet willing to interrupt a popular tour with retreat and prayer. They looked for him (the text literally states it as, "they chased him down" – the image of kids calling, "Mom...", "Mom!" comes to mind) when they couldn't find him and when they did locate him they whined incredulously, "everyone is searching for you!" (again, the voice of the four-year-old comes through, "I couldn't find you!")

Jesus' response to them provides yet another insight into his understanding of his role, to minister to those who have not yet heard rather than to return to the applause of former ministries. "Let's move on to other towns ..." he tells them, jostling them out of their comfort zone and heralding the task that lay before him and them, proclaiming the message. What lessons the church could learn from that one understanding. Instead of longing for the "glory days", the "good old days" of self-serving and self-stroking, imagine the church being called to experiment with new and challenging ministries – what a radical gospel message! "You mean the church isn't about us?!" – now there's a message that is often missed. As I am often wont to say, the first question a congregation needs to ask itself is "does the congregation exist to serve its members, or are the members there to serve Christ in the community?"

Finally, in this brief little text there is that somewhat confusing issue of "not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew him." Jesus, especially in Mark's gospel, often sought to silence those who would publicize his name and his deeds. He imposed this silence on demons, on those whom he healed, and even on his disciples. The confusion clears as we remember that for Mark the only confession of Jesus that is complete and acceptable is at the cross (15:39). Mark's message is fairly clear – the confession of one person who takes up the cross to follow Jesus in loving service means more than the compliments of one thousand pushing and shoving in Galilee.

No wonder the disciples were confused – so many new and radical understandings to grasp in such a short, whirlwind time! Which ones to choose, which one to focus upon? Using the principle of saving the best until last, let's take another look at the implications of the message about moving on, moving outwards. As I mentioned a moment ago, Jesus' call to the disciples to leave the familiar setting of their home town and to move on into and across Galilee could be seen as very controversial. The crowds hanging around looking for ongoing gratification would certainly not be pleased with that move, at least not initially. Can't you just hear the complaints? "Hey, he missed ME!" "But it was MY turn!" "The nerve of that boy, leaving us to fend for ourselves!" Not until later would they be able to reminisce to the grandchildren about how they too had once had the chance to meet the Messiah in person.

However, we do need to give both the townspeople of Capernaum and the disciples some credit for moving on and outwards. The result was that accounts of Jesus' healing power spread like wildfire throughout Galilee, and ever larger crowds assembled to hear him proclaim the good news of reconciliation with God and how the kingdom could be theirs – and ours – through faith. And to give

Mark credit as well, we need to recall that all the events he recounted did indeed take place in only two or three years, and so we can understand his breathless immediacy.

But the work of the church that Christ founded didn't end there – it started there, and the call to the disciples and followers of Christ has continued over two thousand years to continue that proclamation of the Good News. The church has been reminded constantly and sometimes quite forcefully of the admonition from Jesus not to get stuck in one place, with only one group of people, but instead to be constantly reaching out, finding new ways to spread the love of Christ. That message resonates all across the church, and all across the globe. We here at Central are currently being urged and pushed and dragged by God into more change and expansion than we thought we'd ever encounter. And yet at the same time we are also excited by the possibility of new ways to proclaim God's love in Christ through actions of housing, food, education, community building, and pastoral care. Every time we donate our time, our energy, our money we join with the disciples in Mark's gospel as they responded to Jesus' call to head on out into other needy areas, and we join with the faithful across the years who have likewise responded.

It's true that Mark's accounting of those moments is a bit rushed, but we are blessed by God in that we have the opportunity to replay and reconsider those events in slow-motion so that we do not miss the message that the grace of God is not to be held tightly like a treasure but is to be offered far and wide to all who need it. We are able in reflecting on Mark's gospel to realize the depth and significance of the message of reconciliation and forgiveness that Jesus proclaimed. We are further blessed that we are able to celebrate and practice our faith by walking humbly and doing justice, confessing and proclaiming with both our voice and our actions our faith in Jesus, the Messiah, to whom we give all glory and honour.