

**Mark 1:29-39**

<sup>29</sup> On leaving the synagogue he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.<sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. <sup>31</sup> He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. <sup>32</sup> When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. <sup>33</sup> The whole town was gathered at the door. <sup>34</sup> He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. <sup>35</sup> Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.<sup>36</sup> Simon and those who were with him pursued him <sup>37</sup> and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." <sup>38</sup> He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." <sup>39</sup> So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

**Context**

The first major section of Mark's Gospel extends from 1:14 to 3:6 and describes the initial phase of the Galilean ministry. Within this section the evangelist records the calling of the first disciples, Jesus' ministry in and around Capernaum and a series of controversies which are climaxed by the decision of the religious leaders to seek Jesus' death. One descriptive outline of this first major section is:

Jesus' Authority and the Pharisees' Blindness (1:14-3:6)

1. Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom of God and entrance to Galilee (1:14-15)
2. The Call of the First Disciples (1:16-20)
3. Jesus' Authority Over Demons and Illness (1:21-45)
  - a) The Beginnings in Capernaum – a new teaching authority
  - b) **Healing Peter's Mother-in-law**– *our text*
  - c) **The Sick Healed at Evening** – *our text*
  - d) **Departure from Capernaum** – *our text*
  - e) Cleansing a Leper
4. Jesus' Authority Over Sin and the Law – the Growing Conflict (2:1-3:6)
  - a) Healing the Paralytic – the authority to forgive sin
  - b) The Call of Levi
  - c) The Messiah Eats with Sinners
  - d) Jesus and Fasting
  - e) Sabbath: Violations and Lord of the Sabbath
  - f) Healing the Withered Hand - Jesus must be destroyed

In last Sunday's Gospel, Mark witnesses to the authority with which Jesus teaches – an authority put on display as the unclean spirit is overwhelmed. The people are "*astonished*" and "*amazed*." Jesus not only speaks with authority — he also acts with power! The "*amazed*" bystanders acknowledge the teacher's authority, yet they still have to ask: "*What is this?*" (v. 27).

As we continue to read the beginning of Mark's gospel, we encounter stories of healing and restoration. One of the questions asked by Chad Meyers in his work, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, is why Jesus' ministry raises such concerns of the authorities. It is certainly true that there were on-going concerns about messianic claimants. Also true are on-going concerns about violations of Sabbath rules and social norms regarding men-women and the unclean/lepers, but Myers wonders if there is more afoot.

Some of Jesus' actions were revolutionary. Not in the sense that they threatened overturning the political dynamic of the Temple and Roman rule, but something much deeper: the way society viewed

itself and its members. Ben Witherington III (*The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*) notes some of the offensiveness of Jesus' actions:

Though there are later stories of rabbis taking the hand of another man and healing him, there are no such stories of rabbis doing so for a woman, and especially not for a woman who was not a member of the healer's family (*b.Ber.* 5b). In addition, there is the fact that Jesus performed this act on the Sabbath. Thus, while touching a nonrelated woman was in itself an offense, and touching one that was sick and therefore unclean was doubly so, performing this act on the Sabbath only compounds the social offense. But this is not all. The service of Peter's mother-in-law to Jesus (and the others) itself could have constituted work on the Sabbath, depending on what was done (e.g., preparing food). In any case, later Jewish traditions suggest that women should not serve meals to male strangers. The important point about Jesus, however, is that he does not see the touch of a woman, even a sick woman, as any more defiling than the touch of the man with the skin disease. Jesus' attitudes about ritual purity differed from those of many of his fellow Jews. (p. 98)

As mentioned in the commentary (last week) of Mark 1:21-28, we are in constant need of capturing again and again the fresh/new power and authority of these stories.

Our gospel reading presents three different events:

1. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-31)
2. Jesus heals many people (1:32-34)
3. Jesus withdraws and departs from Capernaum (1:35-39)

## **A Last Thought**

PHEME PERKINS (*Mark*, 546) raises the following questions: "How can we read these stories about Jesus, the exorcist and healer, without feeling cheated? God or Jesus has only to will it, and a person is healed. Does God will that person's suffering? If anything would make Jesus angry, it would surely be the charge that God wills the suffering and evil in our world"

While we acknowledge that there is no limit to Jesus' power and authority; that it is for all people, in all places, and in all circumstances (natural and supernatural), we do pause and wonder if such power and authority is active in the world today. What are we to do with miracle stories of healing and exorcisms with people from first century Palestine? Do such stories shine light into our lives? One answer is presented by Richard Jensen (*Preaching Mark's Gospel*, 52) who points out: "The fact is, ... people do still get sick. The fact is that our lives are thwarted by powers and forces over which we seem to have no control." Especially since 9/11 we are aware that terrorists can bring destruction at any time and any place. Even the most powerful country in the world cannot keep evil under its control. We wonder how ISIS could have risen to power in eastern Syria and western Iraq, declaring itself a caliphate in 2015. And in 2020 we are in the midst of a pandemic with the coronavirus (Covid-19) having taken millions of lives world wide.

We struggle with the fact that with a word or touch, Jesus can heal; yet, as much as we may pray and touch and anoint a loved one, they often do not become well and restored to society. They die. We may cry out, "Jesus, you healed with a touch, why can't you do the same through me now?" At the same time, we cannot blame God when our sufferings are not immediately removed after prayer. Even Jesus did not escape suffering and death.

## Commentary

In Mark 1:21, Jesus and the disciples went into the synagogue, here in v.29 we continue the events of that same day as they leave the synagogue and move to the house of Simon and Andrew. One may rightly assume that it is still the Sabbath day. Evening will come in v.32. For the ancient Jews, a new day began at sundown. For Mark, Jesus' first two miracles occur on the same day -- and it is the sabbath. Working/healing on the sabbath will become an issue a little later in Mark 2.

I would assume that the “story teller” in Mark wanted the miracle from last week’s lectionary reading to be told together with the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law. The first clue about their connectedness is that v. 29 begins “and immediately” (*kai euthus* – translating the whole phrase to “On” loses the intensity of the phrase).

Let’s keep the earlier healing in mind as we examine this gospel selection because there are important contrasts between the first healing (1:21-28) and the second (1:29-31):

- man – woman
- synagogue (holy place) – house (common place)
- (supernatural) unclean spirit – (natural) fever

It is very easy to simply note that Jesus cured Peter’s mother-in-law, be swept along in Mark’s breathless pace, and wonder if there is more to the story. Chad Myers, quoting J. Pilch (“Healing in Mark: A Social Science analysis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 1985), suggests two approaches to illness. There is the biomedical perspective that emphasizes the diseases and cures of individuals. There is also the sociocultural perspective which takes into account relationships with other people. To give Pilch's example:

The “sickness” described in the Old Testament as leprosy is simply not leprosy at all from a biomedical perspective. But from the sociocultural perspective -- which is what the Bible always reports -- this condition called leprosy threatens communal integrity and holiness and must be removed from the community. (p. 145 in Myers)

From this Myers offers a brief observation: “Mark's Jesus seeks always to restore the social wholeness denied to the sick/impure by this symbolic order. That is why his healing of the sick/impure is virtually interchangeable with his social intercourse with them” (p. 146). While we are often focused on the ways in which Jesus’ acts control the laws of nature, we often miss the ways in which they challenge the structures of social order. It is not hard to imagine if you are in a dominant position in the social order, it would be possible to be alarmed at actions that seem liberating or restorative.

As Ben Witherington notes, it is unlikely that the people wanted Jesus executed just because he miraculously healed people. He threatened their way of thinking, their cultural stereotypes, their understanding of religious purity. Don’t think we are immune.

Take a simple example: a business or building owner that is required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to make significant and expensive modifications or accommodations to enable wheelchair access. Yet, the act is restorative and liberating in the sense that it tweaks the social order, reducing barriers to an office place where people spend most of their days sitting. ADA then impacts the ways new structures are designed and slowly the social order changes, no longer segregating people to a section of the building or restricting their movements to the “water cooler” or from joining the informal office order. Yet the building owner is faced with a \$250,000 expense to add a two-floor elevator once the owner figures out where it will be located in the building – and the reluctance or resistance is understandable. The restorative/liberating act is not a physical healing to the one in the

wheelchair, but the act is nonetheless a pathway to wholeness for them. It heals them in ways not obvious to outsiders.

### **Healing Simon's Mother-in-Law**

That was a lot of background in preparation for: *Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her.* <sup>31</sup> *He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them.*

In more than one Bible Study a participant has commented, "Really, healing the woman so that she can get up and serve a bunch of men." Pheme Perkins (Mark, New Interpreters Bible) writes:

Peter's mother-in-law lies wracked with fever. She cannot fulfill the role of preparing and serving a meal to the guests, which would have fallen to her as the senior woman in the household. Jesus' healing restores her to her social position within the household. Many women today react negatively to the picture of a woman getting up after a severe illness to serve male guests. That sentiment hardly seems appropriate to the complex gender and social roles involved in the household. Certainly, Peter's wife or a female servant may have prepared food. The privilege of showing hospitality to important guests falls to Peter's mother-in-law as a matter of honor, not servitude. We even exhibit similar behavior. When special guests are expected for dinner, no one gets near the kitchen without clearance from the person who has the privilege of preparing the food. (p. 546)

Jesus restores her to her proper position in domestic society. Her healing and subsequent actions are not just physical, but also social according to 1<sup>st</sup> century standards.

One aspect of the account that would largely be unnoticed in our day was the violations of Jewish religious rules. Recall the insights of Witherington presented earlier in which the list of violations includes healing on the Sabbath, touching a sick person thereby incurring ritual uncleanness, and a man touching a non-relative woman.

All the above helps to make clearer the important contrasts between the first healing (1:21-28) and the second (1:29-31) that occur on the same Sabbath day:

- man – woman
- synagogue (holy place) – house (common place)
- (supernatural) unclean spirit – (natural) fever

Jesus' restoration/liberation impacts all worlds, visible and invisible.

### **Jesus Heals Many People**

*"When it was evening..."* sunset marked the end of the Sabbath. Now free to move about unrestricted by Sabbath regulations, people began to arrive at Simon's house bring with them *"all who were ill or possessed by demons."* (v.32) It may be safe to say that those who witnessed the healings earlier that day in the synagogue (vv.21-28) had spread the word: *"The whole town gathered at the door."* (v.34)

The text says that Jesus *"cured many who were sick..."* It is notable that the word "many" is used inclusively to refer to the sick among the *"whole town gathered"* and is equivalent to "all" who were sick. Without elaboration compared to vv.23-26, the text presents, that Jesus *"drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him."* (v.34b)

Jesus' earlier healing of Simon's mother-in-law was presented not only as a physical healing but also as restorative of the social order. The "order of things" may not always be a lens by which we view things here in the United States, but social order is still operative in other places in the world in ways

not present here. In first-century Palestine, “the order of things” covered all things. Scripture suggests such an all-encompassing order:

- The LORD GOD
- “other gods” // archangels
- Angels, spirits, demons
- Humankind
- All other living creatures

(Note: there are uses of the word *daimonion* that suggest “demons” are equivalent to (false) gods or idols, e.g., Ac 17:18; 1 Cor 10:20, 21; Rev 9:20 which would place them on level 2 in the chart.)

One might think “Jesus performed an exorcism.” True, but not true. True in the way we think about such things, but an exorcism (*exorkizo*) calls upon God to take action. But it is noteworthy that Jesus *ekballo*, “drove out” or “cast out” the demons. Jesus does not call upon a high power, he simply casts them out. This would not have gone unnoticed and helps explain why the scribes conclude that Jesus must be using the power of Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons to cast out demons. Jesus, as a human being, would not have that power. They certainly couldn't equate Jesus with the LORD GOD. Perhaps, because they can't cast out demons by evoking God, they can't imagine that Jesus could either, so it must be the Beelzebub who gives Jesus this power. By not calling upon a God (*exorkizo*), but by speaking on his own authority and having the demons obey, indicates that Jesus has the power and authority of God.

Before leaving this section, let us pause to consider why people came to Simon's door. Was it because they simply heard about the miracle worker and had need of his services? Did they grasp the significance of casting out demons? Were they thinking about the “bigger picture” of the mission of the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom? And did they consider the deepening sense of restoration and liberation in the healings and casting out of demons?

We thus may be able to make some contrasts: the “big picture” (the breaking in of the dominion of God) vs. the “little picture” (temporary respite from woes); the global picture or the community (congregation, neighborhood) vs. me (my life, my feelings). While those who came, even with poorly defined motivations, were healed, Jesus came so that we might see much more than just what might happen to me.

### **Jesus withdraws and departs from Capernaum**

It is good to remember that all these events occur after Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan (1:12-13). Although Mark describes Jesus as leaving Capernaum to go to a deserted place, a wilderness, in fact the land around Capernaum was cultivated. But then Mark is likely writing in Rome for Roman listeners and is not too concerned with the geography. He is concerned about the mission and prayer.

In each instance when Jesus withdraws to a deserted place, the withdrawal is preceded by an account of Jesus' preaching and power. He withdraws from the multitude which seeks his gifts, with the result that the people pursue him to the solitary place to which he has gone. It is easy to think of it simply as “time alone” and “self-care” – and it may be those things. But the character of the deserted place echoes the experience of his own temptation by Satan. The current temptation may be related to the clamor of the crowds, who are willing to find in Jesus a miracle worker who meets their needs and so wins their following. The people, however, have no conception of what it means to go out to the wilderness to bear the burden of choice and judgment, as Jesus has done. He returns to a place which recalls his determination to fulfill the mission for which he has come into the world.

The second point: Jesus' praying. In Mark's Gospel Jesus is seen in prayer only three times: at the beginning of the account, when his ministry is being defined (1:35), in the middle after the feeding of the five thousand (6:46), and near the conclusion when Jesus is in Gethsemane (14:32–42). These three times are all critical moments. The setting for Jesus' prayer in each instance is night and solitude. The situation again echoes the wilderness when Jesus confronts the temptation of Satan and is sustained by help from God. His strength is in prayer through which he affirms his intention to fulfill the will of God.

Simon and the other disciples, upon discovering Jesus gone from the house, "*pursued him*" or more literally "hunted him down." Upon finding Jesus it is not hard to imagine "*Everyone is looking for you*" (v.37) spoken as a reproach. As though, "Isn't this the response you were looking for? Everyone clamoring for Jesus, so let's return to Capernaum." William Lane writes:

"Jesus' answer indicates their failure to understand him or his mission. Acts of healing and expulsion of demons, as much as proclamation, entailed a disclosure of the nature of the kingdom of God and constituted a demand for decision. By his decision a person was qualified for participation in the kingdom or marked for judgment. The crowds that gathered in Capernaum had made their decision, but it could not be the appropriate one because it involved not repentance but attraction to Jesus as a performer of miracles. That is why Jesus interrupts the miracles to go elsewhere to proclaim 'the gospel of God.' His purpose is not to heal as many people as possible as a manifestation of the kingdom of God drawn near in his person, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God's absolute claim upon their person." (p. 82)

They do not return to Capernaum, but set out on mission to all of Galilee and the world beyond.

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## Notes

**Capernaum:** Identified with the ruins at Tel Hûm on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum is one of the few sites specified by Mark as a center of Jesus' preaching and healing activity. After Jesus began his ministry, he moved to Capernaum. Capernaum had a synagogue which had been built with the sponsorship of the local centurion (Luke 7:2–5). While in Capernaum, Jesus healed several people and taught in the synagogue. The city, however, eventually received a scathing denunciation when Jesus condemned its stubbornness as worse than Sodom's (Matt 11:23–24). [AYBD 866]

**Mark 1:29 *the house of Simon and Andrew:*** The Capernaum site today located the likely house of Simon and Andrew "across the street" so-to-speak from the synagogue. Archeology shows that it was a small fishing village on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee.

**Mark 1:30 *Simon's mother-in-law:*** Clearly Peter is married; his wife may even have accompanied her husband on his missionary travels later, as she is mentioned specifically by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:5

**Mark 1:31 *waited on them:*** the expression *diakoneō* primarily means table service. The word later comes to mean "ministry" or "office" (*diakonia*), however it would be premature to extend the later meaning to this scene.

**Mark 1:32 *after sunset:*** marking the end of the Sabbath and so the people were free to travel without violation of the Sabbath rules.

**Mark 1:35 *to a deserted place:*** Jesus would not have had to walk far to find such a place; the local hills would have provided sufficient quiet and solitude.

**Mark 1:36 *pursued him.*** The verb used in this description (*katediōxen*) is quite vivid. It means "to hunt someone down" and is often used in a hostile sense (Ps 17:38 in LXX, *Psalms of Solomon* 15:8).

Marcus suggests that whereas Jesus had called the disciples to be fishers of people, here they were hunting him down or pursuing him.

**Mark 1:38** *Let us go on to the nearby villages.* This is a mission statement, indicating that Jesus came to preach to a larger region, and not just to Capernaum (1:24; 2:17; 10:45)

**have I come.** Lit., “came out,” an expression we do not use much in English. It has the nuance of being sent by God in a calling (Amos 7:14–15; Josephus *Antiquities* 3.400). In 1:24 and here, two reasons are given for Jesus’ coming: to confront evil forces and to preach. These two ideas are repeated in 1:39. The term for “preach” (*kērussō*) both here and in 1:39 is not the term for instruction but for missionary proclamation. It probably refers to preaching the gospel as previously mentioned (1:14–15).

**Mark 1:39** *into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons.* Jesus’ cosmic battle continued to be a part of his ministry so that his actions matched his words. What he did in Capernaum (1:21–28), he also did elsewhere. **Galilee:** Josephus (*Jewish Wars III.iii.2*) described Galilee as a land of great villages: “The cities lie very thick and the very many villages that are here are everywhere so full of people, because of the richness of their soil, that the very least of them contained more than fifteen thousand inhabitants.” In Ch. 1:38 Mark has used a precise term to designate these large agricultural villages which had the size of a city but the structure of a village. His reference, apparently, is to the capital of a toparchy and its subordinate villages. The several tetrarchies were administered by the Herods under the Ptolemaic system of villages grouped into toparchies, with the largest of the villages serving as the capital of each district. Jesus, accordingly, went throughout Galilee concentrating his preaching mission in the synagogues located in toparchic capitals, confronting the several congregations with the absolute claim of God

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