

The Gospel of Mark is a tightly packed book, a much shorter gospel than the other three, but like a bullion cube it is concentrated. In the 16 chapters of Mark, any story or passage is united very closely to what precedes it and follows it. It is important to read each story with peripheral vision for what is around it.

There are two healing stories here – the one about healing Peter’s mother-in-law, and the one about Jesus healing the crowd that gathered around the door.

It all starts with Jesus at the synagogue teaching; Jesus has been proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God.

At the end of what we read today, Jesus is ready to move on to other towns to proclaim the message – “for that is what I came out to do”, he says. Mark tells us that Jesus went on to proclaim the message – and cast out demons.

It is easy to think that Jesus healed and cast out demons simply because he could, but using our peripheral vision, we see that the healing and the casting out of demons is united with his proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God.

We are people who are used to getting well. If we get sick we expect to get over it. We are fortunate if this is the case. Not every sickness is like this. There are chronic illnesses that a person learns to manage, some of them have very

difficult affects upon daily life. Some sicknesses change a person forever. Thanks be to God for the grace in Jesus Christ for the motivation to learn and establish practices of medicine to alleviate suffering and to bring wellness and wholeness, even to those who must live with sickness forever.

The message of Jesus is about the righteous kingdom of a just and loving God who means for all that God has made and given to work to establish that kingdom more and more. I have sometimes prayed at the side of someone under medical care a prayer inspired by an episode of MASH years ago where a doctor offered a prayer stating that all the knowledge gained and given, used and useful to overcome the power of sickness was a sign of God's grace.

We are familiar with sickness and healing, but not so much with demons. We are not big on the idea of demons, about evil powers organizing and working within human life. But some of us have been caught in the gears of a large human organization where fear was rampant, and the temptation to be dishonest and to avoid responsibility has made otherwise good people collude in unkind and selfish ways. In such a setting a person feels powerless. The demon possessed in the

Bible are like this – caught and unable to affect what is oppressing them. The demonic powers, as Paul calls them, are often at work in human organizations.

The message of Jesus is about a kingdom of a just and loving God who means for the creation to be free from its bondage to destructive and ruthless powers. Jesus tells of God’s kingdom in which a person finds freedom of conscience and action by faith in God and in the power of God’s redeeming, forgiving, and just rule and reign. Jesus is telling us that through God’s love and power we are not slaves to any power. In God’s love we are truly free. Not free because we dominate someone else or because we are given power over circumstances or people, but free because we belong, body and soul, to God.

Isaiah has a similar message. We are not ruled by the vagaries of our age – whether young and strong, or old and tired – those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up on wings of eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. God does not faint or grow weary, even if we do.

A teacher of mine, Bill Carl, told of hiking Mt. LeConte in the Smokies with a woman named Margaret Stevenson. Margaret lives in that area and she hikes 10

to 15 miles a day. She knew the Mt. LeConte trail by heart, every rock and tree. Bill said that his first time up the mountain was Margaret's 75th, his second, her 125th, his third her 500th. She finally hiked it 700 times! Bill considered himself to be in very good shape. One time on a long 2 mile up hill section, Bill took off at a fast pace and left Margaret behind. Later he sat down to rest and Margaret came along and went past him steadily moving on. When Bill arrived at the top Margaret was having a snack.

Bill said Margaret's faith was like this. She took in the message daily and it sustained her through every season, overpowering lesser powers that poked up as pretenders to try to frighten, control or defeat her. When her husband was dying of cancer they did not spend their last days sad or in remorse but as in the other days of a faithful life, in joy and thanks and celebration.

Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength...

The message of God's presence heals in every way.

In his book on the Moral Lessons learned in the Art of Surgery, Doctor Richard Selzer tells about standing by the bed of a young woman after her surgery, and her mouth is twisted by a palsy, in a clownish expression. A tiny twig of the

facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed during surgery to remove a tumor in her cheek. Dr. Selzer had to cut the nerve. The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private... “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” he says, “It will. Because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent, her eyes brimming with moisture. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.” He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and Dr. Selzer is so close he can see that the young man twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show that her kiss still works. Dr. Selzer writes, “I hold my breath and let the wonder in.”

The message is the wonder of God’s power, who is not defeated by anything that pretends it has power to defeat us. God’s understanding is unsearchable, he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. The message Jesus proclaims is a message of love and power. It is a healing message. Amen.