

February 5, 2012

Dr. KC Ptomey

In Galilee

Mark 1:35-39

Faith Presbyterian Church Sun City, AZ

If you look at it from Jesus' point of view, it's understandable that he would go away from the crowds and find a quiet place to pray.¹ On the previous day (the Sabbath) he had been teaching in the synagogue. Then he ministered to a man who was possessed by a demon. Then he healed Peter's mother-in-law. Then, Mark tells us, as word got around people began to mob the house, gathering in the yard, bringing the sick for Jesus to heal. Indeed, Mark says, "the whole city" gathered, dozens and dozens of people seeking a miracle.²

Jesus surely must have been exhausted. No wonder he got up the next morning before dawn and went out by himself to pray. No wonder, when his disciples came looking for him with the message that the crowds were clamoring for him, he said, "Let's get out of here."³

If you look at it from Jesus' point of view there is also this: it's not just that Jesus is tired, it's that he has a larger mission to which he must attend than simply healing sick people. Did you hear what he said? "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."⁴

In the very way that Mark tells the story we get the impression that this situation presents Jesus with a vocational crisis. Mark tells us that Jesus went to a "deserted" place. But a more accurate translation of this word would be "wilderness." As in, something we've already heard, "The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days."⁵ Wilderness is the place of testing. It's was the place where Jesus sought clarity about what came into this world to be and do. Mark says he was with the "wild beasts." Not literally. This is a metaphor. "Beasts" are those things that compete with the main thing for which Jesus came into the world.

Geographically, the scholars tell us that around Capernaum there is no wilderness. So Mark isn't speaking about topography here. He is speaking theologically. Jesus is in a place of testing. The crowds are clamoring for him. They adore him. They worship him. He has healed their sick and cast out demons. He has become an overnight sensation. If he goes back to Capernaum he can be a popular preacher and healer. The world will gather at his door.

¹ I am indebted to Patrick Willson for insights into this text in his paper prepared for *The Moveable Feast*, Louisville, KY, January, 2003.

² Mark 1:21ff. Subsequent citations are from Mark, unless otherwise indicated.

³ 1:38.

⁴ 1:38.

⁵ 1:12.

Mark would have us understand that Jesus is sorting things out. Will he be an adored wonder worker? Will he bask in the adulation of the crowds?⁶ Or is there more to his calling than this?

I am reminded of a cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* several years ago. God is standing on a big billowy cloud talking on a cell phone. "I can't help you right now, I've got to be everywhere."

"Let us go to the neighboring towns," Jesus says, "that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."⁷ Surely healing is part of his vocation. Throughout his ministry we find Jesus time and again reaching out to touch lepers and people who are lame or blind or deaf. But, this is not the whole of his mission in this world. One insightful New Testament scholar has put it this way; Jesus is God's excursion into human reality with the purpose of transforming it. Jesus came into the world to cross all kinds of boundaries, to tear down all sorts of walls: illness, and demon possession, and sin, but also boundaries such as laws that separated people from one another.⁸ If the law said don't cure on the Sabbath, Jesus broke the law. If it said, don't touch a leper, Jesus broke the law. If the law said, don't eat a certain kind of food, Jesus broke the law. In other words, the message that he came to proclaim was and is a message about the love and grace of God that would do away with whatever divides human beings from one another and from God.

Healing was part of his ministry but not the whole of it. So we can understand why he moved on from city to city and did not heal everyone who was sick. Look at it from Jesus' perspective, you can understand.

But if you look at it from the point of view of the people who were seeking his help, well then, you get a totally different perspective. What if you had been in the crowd, say, with a child who was desperately ill? What if you had waited and waited but Jesus never got to you? And what if you had remained there in the yard all night hoping that at dawn Jesus would resume his miracle working and would finally touch your child? Then, someone comes out of the house and says, "Jesus has gone in another direction, to other towns. He won't be doing anymore healing here. He can't help you right now, he's got to be everywhere."

This is a hard text. Jesus with his own words declaring that he's not going to heal everybody. Mark has already given us this hard truth in a subtle way. He tells us that the whole town came out to Jesus and that he cured many. Did you hear that? The whole town came but everybody wasn't cured. Many were cured. Not all. This is a hard truth and it's oh so difficult to hear.

But it's not that we don't already know it. We have prayed for a loved one to get well, but he didn't. We have prayed for a child to conquer some demon – drugs or alcohol – but she didn't. We have pleaded with God, "Please don't let it be Alzheimer's," but it was. How many wives, husbands, children, friends prayed for soldiers to return from war but they did not?

⁶ Douglas A. Hare, *Mark, Westminster Bible Companion*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 32.

⁷ 1:38.

⁸ Brian K. Blount, *Go Preach*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p.92.

Every prayer doesn't get answered as we choose, every sick person doesn't get healed, every danger doesn't go away. We all know this truth from our own experience. And we also know the guilt and self-blame that so often accompanies our apparently unanswered prayers.⁹ "If only I had prayed harder, maybe she would have gotten well." "If only I had been a better person." "If only I had attended church more often."

But, God is not a divine vending machine. You don't just put in the right prayer or the obedient act or the pious discipline, and out comes whatever you ask for. Sometimes I wish it were so. I wish that it applied peoples' financial support of the church! I wish those who give generously would be generously blessed and the others, well... But it isn't that way. God is not a vending machine.

The Bible knows this, but we shy away from those parts of the Bible that say this because we wish it were otherwise. "How long will you hide your face from me?" cries the psalmist. (Ps.13) And, "O Lord why do you cast me off?" (Ps. 88) And, "Do not hide your face from me." (Ps. 27) And, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22.) And it was Isaiah, the prophet, who cried, "My way is hidden from the Lord."

"Lord, everyone is searching for you. They are sick and need your healing. They are hurting and need your touch. They are dying, Lord, they need you." But Jesus says, "Let us go on to the next place."

This is truth, Biblical truth, human truth, but hard truth.

So what do Mark and the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark have to say to us who are in need? Who are sick, who are dying, who have loved ones who are hurting, lonely, who are praying for a miracle?

Let me take a stab at an answer. Throughout this Gospel Jesus is constantly on the move. He is out there in Galilee, preaching, proclaiming the message, which, as we have seen, he understood to be the reason that he came into this world. Along the way he is compassionate toward those who come to him in need. But he by no means heals everyone. He is out there in Galilee where people live and die but he's mainly out there doing what he "came out to do," breaking down the barriers that divide people from one another and from God. This is his message and his mission. God is transforming all of creation. God is reconciling all things to God's self and in the process we are being reconciled to one another and to all of creation.

At the end of the Gospel, the women go to the tomb on Easter morning and encounter an angel who says to them, "Go tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him..."¹⁰

It's exactly what Jesus was doing after that long day in Capernaum about which we read in chapter one. He's going into Galilee. This is where he was and where he is. He

⁹ Patrick Willson, p.5.

¹⁰ 16:7.

doesn't heal every person who is sick. He doesn't fix everything that is wrong. He doesn't rescue us from every danger, cure every cancer, or deliver every loved one from the addiction that holds them in a death lock. He doesn't solve every problem we face. He doesn't answer every prayer we offer in the ways we wish he would.

But, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him."

Where? In Galilee. Which is to say, in the midst of our lives. Where days are sometimes long and heartaches deep. In our lives, where hurt intrudes, and disease disrupts and despair sometimes takes the upper hand. In Galilee, in the real world, in the middle of your life, that's where God is. Don't ask me why God doesn't heal all our diseases and dry all our tears and protect our children from harm. Don't ask me why God lets terrible things happen like an AIDS epidemic or the abuse of children. Don't ask me why God didn't intervene on behalf of soldiers or people dying with cancer. I can't answer such questions.

But I can tell you what I know and what I believe to the very core of my being and it is this: Throughout the Bible we read about people just like us who suffer in the same ways and ask the same questions, and yet who have nevertheless experienced God with them in their extremity.

Those who knew Jesus during his ministry thought that with his crucifixion he had gone away from them, just as those he left behind at Capernaum thought he had gone away from them. But the angel said, "Go tell his disciples he's going ahead of you into Galilee, into all of life. He is always with you, in the good times, the times of joy and ease and light heartedness, and in the times of pain and suffering and loneliness and fear and darkness. He is with you in times when you know his presence and feel his power, but he is with you as well when you can't feel him or know him and God seems indifferent or even absent."

Jesus rose early in the morning and went away. When they sought him he said that he had to press on because he had a message to proclaim in all of Galilee. He goes before us into Galilee, into our lives. That is where he is always. Whether we know it or not, feel it or not, yes, even whether we believe it or not. He is with us always – in Galilee – right where we live.

©2012 K.C. Ptomey, Jr. All rights reserved.