

Mark 1:29-39
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.... And he said to [his disciples], ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It’s the last Sunday before the observance of the Transfiguration of our Lord, and here we are *still* in the first chapter of St. Mark’s gospel. As I mentioned last week, it seems the Sundays of this season are “epiphanying” to us this Jesus as the Christ by pointing out how imperative it is early in the gospel to establish the divine weight and details of his mission. As we said last week, first, the baptism of Jesus establishes the One of the mission; second, John points and Jesus calls early followers to and believers of His mission; third, Jesus calls a small group of men to be students of His mission and eventual fishers of men; last week, Jesus shows the divine authority of and behind His mission. Now, this morning, in conclusion, we learn of the evidence and purpose of His mission.

Notice, “evidence and purpose.” They’re not the same, so our text carries a two-fold benefit. First, the evidence, then the purpose, of Jesus’ mission.

It’s important for there to be evidence, isn’t there?... signs of His coming. Last week, we heard Moses promise the children of Israel, “The LORD your God will raise up a prophet like me from among you – you shall listen to him.” And, of course, if that One was to be like Moses, doesn’t Deuteronomy say Moses did great signs and wonders from the LORD in the presence of Pharaoh and in anticipation of the Exodus? So, also with his antitype, the One who would come being greater than Moses, waging miracles against the greater Pharaoh, leading to the greater Exodus.

And it wasn’t just Moses, but also the prophets who testified of the evidence of Messiah’s coming. Isaiah records,

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

Isn’t that the very evidence to which Jesus appeals when John sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is the Christ?: “Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

Yes, they were all signs and evidence of the Messiah's coming, weren't they? Every last one of the miracles served that purpose. In our text, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is highlighted to show how completely and perfectly efficacious are Jesus' miracles, that the woman would immediately return to her vocation. And the healing of the whole town's ills, of those who were sick and oppressed by demons, every last one testified to who this Jesus was.

Never forget that reason for the recorded miracles, or else you will easily despair. It's not uncommon for people to grow weary and impatient with God during time of illness or affliction... to shake their fists at him and think, "If God really cared, He'd heal me now just as He healed them then."

But it's important to define the "then" very carefully. If the "then" is when Jesus walked the earth, yes, healings abounded – sickness, demons, and death itself bent the knee to the God who walked the earth. But, what about the "then" *before* Jesus walked the earth, did they not know the same sickness and affliction we do, without widespread healing?

Consider what Jesus himself says regarding the miracle done for the widow of Zarephath: "I tell you the truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine

came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath..." And again, in the same line of thought, Jesus continues, "And there were *many* lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

Now, those of you who know well the context of that quote there will point out that Jesus was chastising Israel for its unbelief. True. But the point isn't that if you truly believe, Jesus will do miracles (how many false prophets make that claim today!). The point is, God knew there were those suffering in widowhood, in poverty, in hunger, with leprosy and affliction... and He did not fix every single situation in that moment. You ought never judge God's faithfulness by whether or not he heals you immediately and frees you of all affliction. Such a prosperity gospel, such a 'best-life-now' gospel, is misleading, is contrary to the Scriptures, and limits the gospel to this fallen world.

But the true gospel is the forgiveness of sins, is salvation and deliverance out of this fallen world, into the resurrection and the life of the world to come. Of course, one cannot be raised if he does not first die... just as God had said would happen because of the Fall: "Dust you are and unto dust you shall return." That condemnatory death has – in holy baptism – been turned into the door to everlasting life: "Do you not know that all who have been

baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? If we have been joined to Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be joined to Christ in a resurrection like his.”

So then, ‘daily life miracles’ are not your hope to escape death and the consequences of the Fall. Jesus is no mere miracle-worker. If you think you have experienced a miracle, fine. Keep it to yourself, for it pales in comparison to the eternal gospel to be proclaimed. For the gospel that is for all is that which is preached far and wide by the Messiah and his messengers for all to hear and benefit from. The miracles recorded in the Scriptures are evidence that Jesus *is* this Messiah, and – therefore – that the message He proclaims and the messengers He sends are worth listening to and hoping in.

That brings us back to the point of this text: (1) to establish *evidence* that Jesus is the Messiah – that’s the point of the miracles; and (2) to establish the *purpose* of His coming. If He did not come to simply bring healing and your best life now into the world of the Fall, that we might remain the world of the Fall forever, then what did He come to do? Jesus himself responds: “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”

Jesus himself says he came to preach. To κηρυσσω, which means “to proclaim.” But we must interpret this rightly: our

salvation does not rest on the *act* of proclamation, but on the *content* of proclamation. How many there are who claim to be a christ-figure, with some new preaching, some new gospel... everyone from Muhammad to Joseph Smith to Joel Osteen and even to politicians who claim a divine destiny for the country in which they preach. In terms of ability (not divine right), *anyone* can preach. It's the content of what is proclaimed that matters.

Christ's purpose is to proclaim to you the eternal gospel; his miracles were the evidence that He was the one not only to proclaim it, but also to secure it. His cross is the fulfillment of His proclamation. And His empty tomb is vindication to all who hope in His preaching.

What did He go into the other towns to preach? Was it not to preach the coming kingdom in the Messiah's completed work, that now was the time to repent, now was the time to learn and understand the weight of sin, for the day was soon coming when that sin would be laid on the Christ and He would die to pay for that sin and to earn the world's redemption. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" – that's the summary of His preaching, isn't it?

But if the redemption is for the whole world, for every corner of the earth's surface and every generation of earth's time, then should you expect His preaching to have changed or to ever

change? Should you not, in a sense, hold your breath in eager hope that the preaching will also remain the same for you, too? That you will not be left out from this eternal gospel?

Why do we grow so numb to the ‘same’ preaching of the cross? Why do we so easily grow weary of hearing that the Messiah completed His mission and went to the cross for *us too*? Why do we become so self-assured of our righteousness, so bored with the cross of Christ, so jaded toward its divine source and power, so eager to ask “But what, Lord, have You done for me lately?” and judge God’s love by miracles, healings, and other very ‘best-life-now’ standards?

It's no use pretending such temptation does not befall us, as if we are always glued to the preaching and teaching... as if we don't have Sundays in which we wonder if we're going to hear anything new, or we even lament that we must come to God's house to hear His Word. We might as well admit that's our sinful tendency, because it's the tendency of all who are of the line of Adam; how does Martin Luther remind us of this in the Small Catechism: “We should fear and love God so that we do not *despise preaching* and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”

Yeah, that's too often us... tempted to despise preaching, preaching of a holy and divine content, preaching of His Word... that's our sinful tendency.

The world may despise it in the most confrontational ways, the most blatant ways – openly despising it, disparaging it, deriding it as mere fantasy and fiction, when all of history proves it to be fact for the basis of faith. That's how the world despises it – openly.

But we despise preaching in a much more subtle way: we will assent to it as a thorough teaching, we will nod and agree that it sticks to the doctrinal script and Scriptural narrative. But, we subtly despise it by doubting whether the preaching of the cross is of any benefit, whether it actually has the divine power to give the gospel it promises and even supply the sanctification it teaches. Pastors despise preaching by *littering* their sermons with illustration after illustration because they worry the Word hasn't the power to change hearts. Hearers despise preaching by *loving* the illustrations and stories (who needs the Gospel, when we can be entertained!). We reason, "Yes, Jesus, died on the cross, but how does that change my sinfulness? How can the preaching of the gospel in any way combat my sin – my laziness, my alcoholism, my pornographic perversions, my fear of death"...

But doesn't St Paul say that the gospel of the cross of Christ does exactly that? –

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Yes, Paul implies, you may learn and be strengthened to rightly love godly labor for your neighbor's benefit, godly use of wine – especially for the heavenly banquet Christ freely gives, to love the true beauty of the marriage estate and the human sexuality for which God designed it, to take confidence in the face of death and look beyond to the grave to the certainty of the resurrection. In short, you may love to learn and be strengthened by that which has been preached to you of faith in God and fervent love toward one another.

Now, Paul admits, that doesn't mean you are magically 'cured' of such sin waging war with your members; but it does mean, as Paul tells the Romans, that the New Adam you've been given in baptism actively wages war against the members serving Old Adam... that New Adam joyfully wrestles in agreement with the good and holy will of God and in the confidence of the Gospel

and the promise of the final deliverance as has been preached to him.

Thus, when we are tempted by our sinful thoughts to despise the preaching and the Word and, subsequently, the feelings those thoughts produce – boredom with or despairing of the holy Word of God – let us repent... repent not only for being bored, but repent also for forgetting that God's express design and purpose of the Gospel coming through the ages to you was for it to happen not through impressive miracles, but through preaching, that we might hear and meditate upon the holy content of His gospel proclamation. Yes, let us repent for desiring the content of the gospel and its preaching to change and become something else, by definition something not holy, not divine, not eternally beneficial... something earthbound, interesting/entertaining for a moment, powerless for our salvation... something that meets our whims of change, then – *because it changes* – is **irrelevant**.

Christ's preaching does not change; how does St Paul say it thirty years after the resurrection: "I desired to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified." After all, that was Jesus' *purpose* for his mission: "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." That was the very purpose of his coming... to proclaim to all the holy

content, the divine design of His Messianic cross-shaped fulfillment of all things. Consider his preaching – certainly the sermon on the mount, including the love of God’s holy will in which we live all of daily life precisely because we have been blessed to inherit the kingdom of heaven. But, how do we inherit it except that Christ also preached that He came fulfilling the Law and the prophets, He preached that He was the Living Bread from heaven, the Living Water, the Good Shepherd, the Door and Gate, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life. He preached that He was the Son of God and Son of Man who would go to the cross and there – in his sacrifice – effect our salvation, and thus, He preached, “repent and believe the gospel.” *The* gospel... for this preaching, and it alone, carries all the substance and meaning of the whole world until Christ comes again in His glory and brings us to the life of the world to come.

Thus, thanks be to God that Christ did not simply heal all the towns to give them their best life now. Thanks be to God that his healing touch for us now – as much as we rightly pray for it and rejoice in it for today – is only meant to remind us to take confidence in Him today while we patiently await His final deliverance tomorrow. Thanks be to God that the preaching of Christ crucified never changes, but the gospel that redeems and forgives and saves is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Thanks be to God that that never-changing Gospel and its eternal sealing and securing was the very purpose of Christ's mission.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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