

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 4, 2024 – FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“Jesus Throws Away the Rules—For our Healing”*

Isaiah 40:21-31 (The prophet declares there is no one like our God)
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c (Praise to the Lord for His mercy, justice, and favor)
1 Corinthians 9:16-23 (St. Paul becomes like everyone, so they may be saved)
St. Mark 1:29-39 (Jesus heals and delivers many who are diseased)

Yuck. We just want to pull the covers over our heads and go back to sleep. Those bears have the right idea, hibernating. A common response to the winter doldrums that some—or many—of us are experiencing. And those groundhog prognosticators are no help. Just trying to live one day at a time, we may be discouraged, lack direction, or feel as though we've been cut adrift. Whatever is causing our melancholy and uneasiness, the good news from today's Holy Scriptures is most welcome. In Psalm 147, we read that Our God “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. The Lord lifts up the lowly, but casts the wicked to the ground.”

With our hopes renewed by God's promises of healing, cheer, and justice, let us turn to our Gospel lesson. During most of this new church year, we'll be following St. Mark, the first of the Gospels to be written. Today's story takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when He traveled to Capernaum, a fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, a town that would become his home-away-from-home. Here, He stayed at the house of Simon Peter. When Jesus arrived, extraordinary things began to happen—and, as we heard about, last Sunday, word of His authority spread quickly.

As this passage begins, Jesus and some of His disciples have just left the synagogue on the Sabbath and have come to Simon Peter's house. Although the text doesn't say this, the custom of that era was to have the major meal of the Sabbath at midday after worship at the synagogue—similar to our big Sunday dinners after church. Immediately upon entering the house, the disciples tell Jesus that Peter's mother-in-law is ill. After Jesus heals her, she serves them dinner. (Hmm? An ulterior motive?) I can just picture her bringing in platters of pita bread, stuffed vegetables, skewered meat, pomegranates and oranges, and skins of wine from the local vineyards.

When we think of Bible stories about Jesus healing people, we think of major illnesses or spiritual bondage—leprosy, blindness, deafness, paralysis, epilepsy, demonic possession. Compared to these, a fever seems like a petty ailment. Mark doesn't even say it was a high fever. There's no indication it was serious or life-threatening. One commentator suggested that Peter's mother-in-law would likely have gotten well within several days, given a proper diet and enough rest.¹ So why would Jesus spend His time and power on something as routine as a fever?

Then there's the fact that the patient is a woman, and—to put it mildly—the culture of that day didn't place women on the same social level as men. Women of honorable families were expected to protect their modesty by remaining in a private area of the home. For a male outsider to touch her violated conventional behavior. And didn't Jesus realize that He might catch the fever, which could slow down His ministry?

The fact that this is a private healing, only witnessed by a few people—why not heal her publicly, so her instant recovery could be a witness for God's power, mercy, and glory? This healing happened at home. You know—the place we forget our manners and concern for others. The place where we too often ignore and take for granted those with whom we live. Besides, this is a mother-in-law—the person who's too often the butt of jokes. Why is this story even in the Bible?

Notice, Jesus' disciples didn't ask Him to heal Peter's mom-in-law. They just told Him she was sick. They may have simply been explaining that her incapacitation would slow down the meal preparation; dinner might be a bit late. After all, this was the Sabbath, and healing and all other forms of "work" were forbidden. So they probably didn't expect Doctor Jesus to make a house call. But as always, Christ does the unexpected.

The Talmud—a compilation of rabbinic teachings that guided Jewish daily life—set forth an elaborate process for healing a fever, which called for repeatedly tying an iron knife to a thorn bush by a braid of hair.² But Jesus throws the rule book out the window. He goes to the woman, touches her, lifts her up, and she's healed! On the Sabbath, mind you.

This is the first healing reported in Mark's Gospel. And it's just a private matter at home. What? We want to see Jesus' ministry out in public with razzle-dazzle—like the guy He delivered from demons right in the middle of the synagogue worship service, last week. But here, Jesus is calling us to see Him in the ordinary. The late Dr. Loy Witherspoon, founder and chairman of the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, put it this way: "Anyone with eyes to see can see Jesus in Christian social action in the ghetto, or in a Scout helping an elderly person across the street. But can we see Jesus in the kitchen?"³

St. Mark goes on to tell us that after sundown, when the Sabbath was over—such that Jesus could now heal without breaking the Jewish law—people flocked to the door of Simon Peter's house, and Jesus cured their diseases and cast out their demons. But why does He tell them not to speak about His healing miracles, His authority and power? His love and mercy? Could it be that by not broadcasting His success through every available means, Jesus is telling them—and us—that popularity and fame are not important in Christian ministry?

And what's this about after dark He goes out to an isolated place to pray? Isn't Jesus feeling well, either? After all, prayer is reserved for the synagogue, right? And these days, don't we reserve prayer for mealtime and bedtime? And wasn't Rabbi Jesus supposed to be like the Pharisees, who prayed loudly and in public, in broad daylight, at a decent hour, where everyone could see them, and be inspired by their faithfulness and devotion? I mean, no one can see or hear Him praying in the dark, off by Himself—except God, that is. Could Jesus be telling us there is a different way to pray? That communication with our Creator can be done without conventional formulas? That connecting with the source of our healing and deliverance might result in sacrificing some sleep?

Perhaps most puzzling of all in this story is when Simon and the others have to hunt Jesus down while He's praying and explain to Him the tremendous opportunity for ministry back in town. Then, with all the locals looking for Him, Jesus says it's time to hit the road! St. Mark tells us that next He went all over Galilee preaching and healing. Wouldn't it have been easier to stay put and minister to all those needs in town, where there was a ready-made list of patients and potential followers?⁴

But hang on a second. Perhaps, by not healing the hurt back in Capernaum, Jesus may be advising us to be discerning about when, where, and how we should use our spiritual gifts and talents. Maybe He's saying that sometimes God calls us outside our comfort zone, to think outside the box, to push and even rip open the edge of the envelope. All the world isn't just a stage, it's also a mission field.

Once more, Jesus shows us that His way of thinking of relating to God and doing ministry is totally foreign to our nature, our intuition, our traditions, and our society. Just as He did 2,000 years ago, Christ continues to turn our individual and cultural notions topsy-turvy. To follow Jesus means to expect the unexpected, and to find freedom in obedience. And just possibly, throwing out the instruction manual and starting fresh by imitating *Him*. He calls us to venture out of our Capernaums into the Galilees of our own lives.

For us, exploring the unknown may mean that you start by trying a different pew some Sunday morning (gasp!). Or take a different volunteer position at church. Or experiment with a different lunch partner. Or think about a better way of relating to those closest to you. Or reach out to someone from whom you've been alienated and show them some Christian love.

Jesus calls us to take such risks. To bring our light out from under the bushel. To dig up the coins He gave us that we buried for safe keeping, and let God help us multiply them like loaves and fishes. Jesus doesn't call us to do what's easy. Or comfortable. Or conventional. Or even successful. He only calls us to be faithful. And, as we heard last Sunday, to *trust* Him as we journey along the path together.

There's an episode of *Third Rock from the Sun*, a sitcom from the '90s, in which a family of aliens attempting to live as humans near Cleveland get a job right after Christmas accepting returns at a department store. Sally, the group's Security Officer, quickly grows tired of making exchanges. So, as people step up to the counter unhappy with their gift, she searches the room for one they'll like better and just gives it to them—no money exchanged, no questions asked.

And in God's great cosmic returns and exchanges department, I think sometimes when we can't find what we're looking for, God blesses us, too, with something different—and better. Just as Jesus did with the people in today's Gospel story.

As we trudge on toward Lent, dreaming of Spring and the glory of Easter, let us remember that Christ is with us, loving us unconditionally, eager to heal our sickness of body, mind, and soul, and gifting us with—not necessarily what we want, but—what we need. And what we need most is *Jesus!* You can meet up with Him in prayer, meditation, Bible reading, worship at church, in the love of a friend, family member, or pet, or simply by seeking Him with all your heart. He is as close to us as our next breath.

Let us pray:

Doctor Jesus, You are our Great Physician. Thank You for the healings we have seen and experienced—and for those You will yet do, in answer to our prayers. Thank You for showing us new, unexpected, different, and sometimes even rule-breaking ways to live the abundant life that You promise all who believe in You. Companion us through these dark and cold days of winter, that we may rejoice with You in the glories of spring and new life at Easter. In Your Name we pray. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. James Caldwell, III, "Catch the Fever," n.d., [Sermons.com](https://sermons.com/sermon/catch-the-fever/1353925) <<https://sermons.com/sermon/catch-the-fever/1353925>> 30 January 2024. Used with permission.

² Caldwell, *op. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*