

Mark 1:29-39: **Guest Preacher**

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Last week Megan vividly observed that Mark's gospel opens with the urgency of a story told by a five-year-old. Yeah, that rings true. We heard the gospel writer breathlessly tell about Jesus entering a synagogue, preaching with authority, and right there liberating a man from a demon. Today's gospel story picks up immediately there in Mark 1, keeping up the flow of action.

²⁹ After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. ³¹ He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

³² That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered near the door. ³⁴ He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

³⁵ Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. ³⁶ Simon and those with him tracked him down. ³⁷ When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!"

³⁸ He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." ³⁹ He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Serving in consistent ministry at a church can be a privilege. The longer a staff member stays in a community, the deeper the relationships may go. Personally, I'm grateful for that gift — for the time to really know various church members. And there's also a potential downside to having the same staff for years. Y'all might start getting accustomed to what your preachers say. I assure you that Megan and I try not to be utterly predictable. Still I'm sure you recognize patterns in our storytelling, scriptures we gravitate toward or away from, or sermon "flavors" that reveal what kind of theologian each of us is.

And that's okay. We each bring the specific gifts the Spirit has given us. Still...it can be surprising and lifegiving to hear from someone different, from a guest preacher. Has a guest preacher ever offered a sermon that changed your life?

I asked Aimee if she had a most memorable guest preacher experience. She said she grew up mostly with her dad's preaching and that of a few other male pastors. Then at seminary she heard one of her women professors preach, Jana Childers. Jana's presence and voice opened a whole new world for Aimee, who kept practicing and studying faithful preaching until she had completed a doctorate in it.

Here at Highland we've committed to inviting guest preachers at least quarterly. This past year we heard from the Reverends Brent Bowden, Lee Hinson-Hasty, Rebecca Barnes, from our transitional Youth Ministry leader Michael Harper, and from seminary intern

Mary Mitchell. God spoke through each of those guest preachers in unique ways that our community needed.

Whatever worshipers in that Capernaum synagogue may have been accustomed to hearing, one sabbath day they encountered a startling guest preacher. “What’s this?” they said. “A new teaching with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!” When’s the last time you or I heard a sermon with that kind of power?

Then Jesus moves from that public space into a very private one. He and his brand-new followers — Simon, Andrew, James and John — leave the synagogue and head to Simon’s house where Jesus takes the hand of Simon’s fever-stricken mother-in-law and lifts her up to wholeness. Notice that if anybody’s contagious here, it’s Jesus who is spreading *health*. He heals her with the same clear power evident in his preaching. “The fever left her, and she served them” says verse 31. This matriarch gets renewed health and she responds by offering hospitality.

Yes, in that culture it would be typical for women to make meals for the household. But nothing in the gospels shows us Jesus healing people for his own benefit. He doesn’t make this woman well so he can enjoy a nice dinner. Consider a couple other ways we can look at this healing.

First, Simon’s mother-in-law beginning to serve them shows that now the sun has gone down. Sabbath is over and the household can get back to work. Later in the gospel good religious folk will give Jesus a lot of grief for healing people on the sabbath. Here in chapter 1 he’s already doing that kind of boundary-pushing ministry. God’s liberating power doesn’t go dormant because it’s a day of rest. In fact there’s nothing restful about being possessed by a demon or burning up with fever, so by healing those people Jesus makes true rest possible.

Second, that phrase “and she served them” uses the same Greek word from which we get our English word “deacon.” A deacon is one who serves others, cares for them. If you’ve ever gotten a call or a visit or a meal or a card or a ride or a prayer from one of our church’s deacons, you know what that’s like. Or if they’ve brought home communion to you or a family member. This story reminds us that when Jesus heals us in body and spirit, it’s to enable us to serve. Which is what Jesus has come among us to do.

Jesus shares his life, his power, so that the gift might be passed on. In this passage, early in his ministry, we see Jesus literally giving power to the faint. That’s exactly what Isaiah promised God would do for God’s downtrodden people.

Of course once word of these healings gets around the town of Capernaum, *everyone* with a need gatecrashes the house where Jesus is staying. Jesus meets each person at their point of need, by healing an illness or banishing an evil spirit.

Jesus gives of himself all that evening, then slips into the wilderness before dawn for rest and prayer. Jesus needs sabbath too. “[T]hough healing was a good and holy pursuit, it had

already begun to hem him in and limit his ability to move around publicly.”¹ So when the disciples hunt him down and yet more townspeople clamor to keep him there (who wouldn’t?), Jesus takes his friends and sets out for the neighboring towns so he can preach good news to them as well. Jesus goes on a preaching tour because the kingdom of God grows by being given away, not hoarded in one place.

About 20 years ago religion researchers conducted a large academic study about how congregation members experience preaching. They interviewed 263 laypeople from 28 churches about “what helps and what hinders effective preaching communication from the pulpit.”² So much helpful information came out of that study that the researchers published four books to share all that they learned. What do people hear in sermons and why does it matter? One Black listener from the study said, “What the sermon does particularly — I like it in the African American context — is to charge the air with words from God.”³

That’s a high bar. Right after seminary I served a church in New Jersey which offered me a one-year interim position. I was basically an associate pastor, though not yet ordained. Recently I went back and looked at the couple sermons I preached that year. You’ll be glad to know I’m not going to reprise those sermons here. While I stand by the theology I preached, those sermons now seem too long and like I was trying too hard to be clever and artsy. That congregation was mercifully patient with me, a very green guest preacher.

Unlike my early experience, Jesus seems to come into his own preaching with a fully-formed vision. Mark 1:14-15 tells us the message Jesus preached: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Jesus knows his mission and he lives it out with clarity. He charges the air with God’s word *embodied*. He brings blazing particularity to God’s loving involvement in our world.

What might Jesus say to us if he stood right here and guest preached? Maybe he’d proclaim the same word: “Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” Then he’d say something *unpredictable*. Transformative. Challenging all our expectations. Bringing life to places we thought were dead. What current-day demons would we beg Jesus to drive away?

With Jesus among us we might find ourselves awestruck by his authoritative presence. Or like the worshipers who heard him guest preach in his hometown synagogue we might try to run him out of town. That story is over in Luke’s gospel.

Even if we craved more preaching and healing from Jesus, he’d be unlikely to linger. He’d probably walk down and visit the Baptists. And the Catholics. And come alongside our houseless neighbors and bring them good news. And invite himself to have dinner with a refugee family.

¹ Harmon, Chelsey. “Mark 1:29-39 Commentary.” <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-01-29/mark-129-39-4/>

² Mulligan, Mary Alice et al. *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*. Des Peres, MO: Lucas Park Books, 2005. p. vi.

³ Mulligan et al. p. 8.

And just like Jesus departed Capernaum to guest preach elsewhere in Galilee, that's okay. Because before leaving, Jesus empowers the people of Capernaum, and Jesus empowers us, to keep sharing his urgent good news. To shape our communities in Christ's image. To confront this world's oppressive forces with a gospel that is tangible and lifegiving.

You and I, friends, are called by Jesus as guest preachers. Jesus inspires us to catch his own vision and share it. To let God change our hearts and lives. To demonstrate God's love by extending grace, compassion, healing, and welcome. Being served here at Christ's table, we're fortified for serving in God's world.

In the name of God the Preacher,
God the Word embodied,
and God the listening Spirit.