

# The Healer and Preacher

## Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "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." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Commentator Gary W. Charles says if you go to the movies today; you will wait to see the feature attraction. In this time of global pandemic few of us are going to the movies but imagine with me. While you wait, you will see previews of coming attractions. When we go to the first chapter of Mark, you will see no previews of coming attractions, no genealogies, no charming birth stories, no tales of teen Jesus stumping the rabbis after going AWOL (absent without leave).

Mark's feature attraction is introduced in large capitals in the opening sentence of the Gospel, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (1:1). Jesus arrives on the scene with heaven-splitting force (1:10), deals with Satan in the wilderness (1:12-13), announces the impending reign of God on earth (1:15), chooses his first disciples (1:16-20), and shows his compassion and power over a demon (1:21-28) before you can blink an eye.

In one way, though, chapter 1 of Mark is more like previews of coming attractions than any in-depth viewing of the feature attraction. Mark moves through the material at the opening of his Gospel with the speed of one who is afraid to let anyone think that they can know Jesus only by a quick preview. Fueled by his favorite word, “immediately/at once,” Mark races you through a day in the life of Jesus as a reporter might race a candidate through a day of political appearances.

The race continues in the text for the fifth Sunday after the Epiphany with Mark moving you through a day in the life of Jesus with more speed than depth. **Gary W. Charles**

From the synagogue through the house; Jesus leaves with his four disciples, carriers of the God’s hope, to the house of Simon, whose mother-in-law is sick. It is not said that she has an impure spirit, like the man of the synagogue (1:23), but simply fever (1:30), a fever that prevents her from working. She seems impotent; nobody helps her. But Jesus grabs her hand firmly, to raise her up.

This act completes the first pair of healings in Mark’s Gospel: the demon-possessed man of the synagogue and the woman with fever in a house that is invaded by males. The woman is prostrated, and Jesus raises her up, carrying out a true humane work, which should come at the end of the Jewish Sabbath.

In the mentality of those who were present, a demonic force was attributed to fever; for that reason, it is said “it left her” (v. 31) as if it were a person. As on other occasions, the healing done by Christ shows his intervention in the field dominated by evil, death, and illness. It is the messianic victory over the forces of evil, the radical invitation to the kingdom of God.

The house, is a meeting space for family and relatives, a privileged place of the community. We are at the house of Simon and Andrew, where Jesus comes with his four disciples. The expression of healing is surprising, but as important as Jesus’ expression, in this case, is the response of the mother-in-law; she began to

serve them. Service is a key topic in the call and pursuit of Jesus. This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into a day of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath. She served them (1:31). Simon's mother-in-law interprets the gift that she has received; her service cannot be understood as a woman's menial work under the domination of lazy males, but as a true messianic ministry, creator of Jesus' new family. For that reason, this woman is Jesus' first servant and joins him in the radical announcement, in action, of the kingdom of God, his first deacon. **Ofelia Ortega**

Mark introduces the first deacon in the New Testament, Simon's mother-in-law. She is healed by Jesus and responds to restored health by serving those gathered in her house. Just as Jesus was served (*diakoneō*) by the angels in the wilderness (1:13), so now Simon's mother-in-law serves (*diakoneō*) Jesus and his friends. In just a short period, Simon will see it as Jesus' job to serve up some more healing to an anxious crowd rather than to serve them himself. If only he had learned from the example of his mother-in-law. This is no woman bowing to cultural convention and keeping in her restricted place as a servant; this is a disciple who quietly demonstrates the high honor of service for those who follow Jesus (10:44–45).

This first healing in Mark's Gospel follows on the heels of the first exorcism. Early on in this Gospel, we learn that Jesus will not shy from broken bodies or demonic spirits. In fact, in typical Markan hyperbole "all" the city comes knocking on Simon's mother-in-law's door looking for exorcism and/or healing.

Mark also introduces us to "the crowd" (*ochlos*). "The crowd" grows in fascination over Jesus. In the opening reel of the feature attraction, Jesus doesn't try to draw a crowd; in fact, he tries to escape them.

Another prominent Markan theme that surfaces first in this chapter is the motif of secrecy. Though Jesus often insists on keeping his identity secret, especially

after a healing or exorcism, he is often disobeyed. As for us, the reader, there is no secrecy. From Mark 1:1, there is not a reader unaware of the identity of Jesus. Within the Gospel, though, only demons name Jesus for who he is, but no one in the story seems to hear them or pay them any attention. Jesus insists on secrecy because no one will know his true identity by viewing only the previews.

Before dawn, and presumably while the crowd is sleeping, Jesus steals out into the darkness to pray. From the opening chapter of his Gospel, though, Mark introduces us to Jesus who is both a faithful Jew and a faithful Jew at prayer. Jesus is one who makes time and seeks a place to pray. For Mark, prayer is not peripheral to the identity of Jesus, and by implication, not peripheral for those who follow him.

Jesus retreats to a “desert place,” a “deserted place,” a “solitary place” to pray. At future times Jesus tries to retreat with his disciples for rest and prayer. Often, he is confronted by the persistence of a needy crowd; now he is confronted by the persistence of needy disciples.

Peter and friends “hunted” or “searched for” or “went after” Jesus. However, there is a stronger meaning; Peter and his friends are astonished at the behavior of Jesus and come to restore him to his senses. This is the first instance in Mark of Simon Peter correcting Jesus; it will not be the last (8:32). Simon knows what Jesus should be doing, and it is not sitting in solitude and prayer. Anxious crowds await his “immediate” attention.

Interesting, last week, active and retired clergy of the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ in Michigan met for “Boundary Training.” This is a course that teaches and discusses how clergy protect themselves and their congregations from unhealthy relationships, those that cross the line of appropriate clergy, church member, or church group behavior. The disciples had not had such training as Simon and his friends find Jesus as if he is lost and has forgotten his task. In

typical Markan irony, Jesus points out that he is not lost and that his task is not simply to respond to the incessant cries of a crowd. He has come to “preach” (1:15) and will not be constricted to one locale and confined to the expectations of anxious disciples. This is the first time in Mark that the disciples want Jesus to do something different from his own desire; it will not be the last (6:36).

The text ends with another summary statement from Mark. In case we have missed it so far, Mark tells us that the feature attraction consists of a Jew who has come not to draw a crowd or perform stunning miracles or rewrite Jewish history and tradition. He has come to preach and to cast out the demonic in people and in systems that diminish or distort that gracious reign of God. Mark invites us to pay attention to the rest of the story, because the feature attraction has only begun.

### **Gary W. Charles**

Jesus goes forth “proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Preaching and healing. Healing and preaching. This represents the ministry of Jesus in a nutshell, and it represents still the ministry of those who follow him. **Mike Graves**