

“Raised Up, Ready to Minister” based Mark 1:29-39, Isaiah 40:21-31

Delivered on February 7, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

The thing about the gospel of Mark is that it moves very quickly. Here we are today, still in the first chapter, and Jesus is on his second miracle, and he’s ready to run away from his rapidly growing fame and popularity, much to the dismay, I’m sure of Peter and Andrew who rather like being celebrities in their hometown.

When studying Mark, we run the risk of going too quickly through it, but when spreading it from Sunday to Sunday, we can go too slow. So, let’s remember that this story today comes right on the heels of last week’s text, which was Jesus’s visit to the synagogue in the hometown of Peter and Andrew, where a man possessed by a demon threatened to ruin the day, but once Jesus exorcised the demon, Jesus was the talk of the town.

But this happened on a Sabbath, so the people wait to ambush him. After the synagogue, Jesus had time to go over to Peter’s house, where Peter’s mother-in-law is ill with a fever. She is sick enough that she stayed home, and sick enough that she could not work, could not prepare a meal, or do what she wanted to do and be hospitable to Jesus, her son-in-law’s guest.

The way that Mark moves through the events he records in his gospel, it’s hard to get a sense of the gravity of the situation, or any of the extra details. However, I think we can gather from his description that this illness is serious. First off, any fever in that day was serious. There was no modern medicine to deal with illness. Also, Mark is not a native Greek speaker, so his word choices can say a lot. Here in this text, he uses two words central to his whole gospel. The first is that he says Jesus ‘raises’ her, the same word, that Mark uses to describe the resurrection of Jesus and in regard to the resurrection on the last day.

Another important word here is the word I’ve translated as “minister,” which is the word ‘*diakonos*,’ from which we get the word Deacon, meaning to serve. We will see this word at the start of Lent to describe how the Angels minister to Jesus, and it comes again at the apex of Mark, when Jesus says he came to serve, not to be served. Yes, Jesus came to minister to the world, not be ministered to, by giving his life as a ransom for the many, for us. Jesus for Mark is the suffering servant which Isaiah predicted some 500 to 800 years earlier.

When Peter’s mother-in-law is raised up by Jesus, she is restored to her vocation to be like Christ and serve, not because Jesus wanted a snack or to put a woman in her place then, but because Jesus restored her life, pushed death away from her.

Friends, I love that the committee that created the lectionary of suggested readings put today’s passage from Isaiah together with this passage from Mark’s gospel. I appreciate this partly because I believe Mark framed his gospel on Isaiah, specifically that he wrote the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40-55. This is the second of three sections in Isaiah. It is one which

speaks to the end of the exile for the Kingdom of Judah, but points to much more than just a return to their homeland. It describes a Suffering Servant who will come, who is both at the same time the arm of God, meaning the very power of God, the Word or God even, yet he is also a child of Abraham, a descendant of King David, the root of Jesse, a new King.

Mark's gospel opens with the same proclamation Isaiah makes of 'good news' or 'good tidings' because God is coming to deliver the people. The portion we read today starts off, 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? Have you not been told from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?' – just how great God is and how close God is.

Isaiah points to the fact that the God of Israel is the creator of all things, all powerful indeed, more so than any worldly ruler. Yet the God of Israel is with the people. Isaiah points out that Judah may think that its sins can be hidden from God, or that exile is denying them their rights, but their sins cannot be hidden, and exile is the consequence of their idolatry. Yet, we read that even though they are powerless, God gives strength to the powerless. Yes, those who have been afflicted by sin and death in the world, will after waiting on the Lord for all these years, instead 'renew their strength, rise on wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.'

Initially, this text points to the long journey the young and old will make to go home from Babylon, but it is the promise of new life in knowing the God who redeems all things. This is the God we see in Jesus, who raises up and restores Peter's mother-in-law, and then, once the Sabbath has ended, receives the masses of people who come to him. They come to him for healing and wholeness, for freedom from sin and death. They seek redemption from the demons that have control of their lives.

Isaiah writes of a new exodus for God's people, returning to the promised land as they had before, when God delivered them from Egypt, and Mark writes again of exodus, freedom from sin and death, a renewed Israel. Friends, we are not in exile right now, but there are times it feels like it. But we can learn from the hope of the exiles. For we are in waiting, waiting for an end to this pandemic and a restoration of some sense of normalcy.

The other day, Harrison asked me when the sickness, as he calls it, will be over. My son is five and I did not know what to tell him, except to give him hope that it will end. I know that it will, because I have heard from the beginning, that our God is with us and will make all things new. I know from looking at history that viruses that cause no death now, were fatal in Jesus's time. I know that we can deal with them because of the progress of modern medicine founded in a caring for others that I believe has been cultivated not by human nature, but by the influence of life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the world. It can be hard when new things arise and present new challenges, but I know that it will get better because I have heard, as I said, from the beginning that our God is with us. I believe this, even if in the meantime, I am tired, because still, so many are dying by this disease.

Friends, we must not squander our time of waiting, and we must be faithful in it. Ours is not the role of zealot trying to overthrow empire or the role of rebel in the worldly sense. Instead, ours is like the role of Daniel, the role of faithful servant, resisting the urge to conform to the world, but yet heeding the call of God through the prophet Jeremiah, to work for goodness, for prosperity of the city they are in, not in opposition to the world around us, but for its benefit. We are to be in this world, but not of it.

Our job is to serve as the son of God serves us, with love and sacrifice, to do our part to be a part of the solution, by reminding people, 'Have you not heard our God is with us?' It is easy to cast stones and criticize and attack all the day long, but to be a part of God's work in this world is to recognize the truth, that when the creator of all things entered into creation it was to serve. It was to live as we live, die on a Roman cross in our place and for our sins, and then rise again to new life so that we might live too.

All of this is not because God has something to gain from us or that we've earned it, but because God loves us, made us in God's own image, and longs for us to love and serve him, by loving and serving one another, all who are made in God's image. The picture of the new creation that Isaiah writes about is brought about by the suffering servant who is one with God and one with Israel, meaning one with us, humanity. Those who are called in service to this servant, are part of God's work, the work to renew and restore all of creation until the end of all things, when God will dwell with the people as promised.

This is the promise we see realized in the New Testament in Jesus who calls us to be servants, to love as he loved us, and share in his work now to reconcile all things, until he comes again in glory. The suffering servant has come and has dealt with sin and death, we are not in exile, but we are waiting. By his life, death and resurrection, it is in this period of waiting that we are empowered to serve, to minister to the healing of this world, through our love for God and our love for one another, to restore creation. Receiving this truth is the foundation of our faith.

I pray that on the hearing of this good news, your strength is renewed right now, and that like Peter's mother-in-law you might be raised up to love and serve again, even as this world does all that it can to wear us out. But this is the truth – sin and death have no power over us. In the midst of waiting, just as in exile, you are loved by God and called to receive this love and share it. The God who made all things knows you by name and loves you to raise you up now into a community joined by God's Holy Spirit – the church.

Friends, there are three words for evil used in the New Testament and, interestingly enough, all three speak of being afflicted, riddled with pain and rotted by sin. The evil of this world thinks that it has control over us through sin, but by our faith in the God who loves us and is reaching out to raise us up, we can know that we are meant for more. We are called to serve by loving God and loving one another to be a part of making this world a better place. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 1: 29-39 (Pastor's Translation) And ***immediately*** from having come out of the ***synagogue***, they came into the ***house*** of Simon and ***Andrew***, with James and ***John***. And there, Simon's ***mother-in-law*** was laying there ***sick***, burning with a fever. And immediately, they ***called*** to him about her. And having come to her, he raised her up, having taken ***hold*** of her ***hand***. The ***fever left*** her, and she ***began*** to ***minister*** to them. And then, in the ***evening*** when the sun went down, they began ***bringing*** to him all those who were being ***afflicted***, and those being ***possessed*** by demons. And all the ***city*** was ***gathered*** around at the ***door***. And he ***healed*** many who were being afflicted by various diseases and he ***cast*** out many demons. And he would not allow the demons to ***utter a word***, because they knew him. And in the ***night***, before the ***sun*** came up, him having ***risen*** up, he departed out to a ***solitary place*** and there, ***Jesus*** was ***praying***. And ***Simon*** and those with him hunted after him, and having found him, they also called to him, 'Everyone here seeks and adores you!' And he said to them, 'Let us go a different way, into the neighboring towns, in ***order*** that I might ***proclaim*** out there, for this is why I have come.' And he was going, proclaiming the message in their synagogues, in all of ***Galilee***, and casting out demons.