

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Forth and Back and Forth”

Mark 1: 29-39

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As you grow as a Christian, it's important that you let the Bible grow on you and with you... By that I mean, that the way you intersect the Bible as a child should not be the same way you do as a teenager or as an adult. The way you engage a text as you move deeper into the faith changes, or should. There's more there than first meets the eye.

There are the stories to learn.

There are the constraints and commands to obey.

There is the devotional use of scripture that encourages.

There is the doctrine, the grand truth we come to see.

But there's more... the Bible is multilayered for the person of faith. Or you might think of it like a huge and wonderful house where new rooms are always there to discover and in those rooms, new worlds.

I walked into a new room along the way when I began to assume the gospel writers were first century artistic theologians and pastors and not just fishermen or tax collectors with a note pad and an inspired pen.

When Matthew writes, he writes with intentionality. Luke and John have certain things they are up to... as does Mark... and when you begin to pay close attention... when you read between the lines, as they want you to... there are new things to know.

For instance, if you read Mark straight through in one setting and assume Mark is a sophisticated gospel writer, you're going to notice some things he wants you to notice.

Like, on every page, at least once, you'll see the word, “**immediately**”... “**straightway**,” as the King James said. Well, you can either assume Mark has a small supply of papyrus and is trying to get through the story in Cliff Notes fashion... or you might say, as Chris Thacker said to me this week, that Mark is a gospel writer on Ritalin... “**go... go... go.**” Or you can ask yourself,

“**What is Mark trying to tell me...**

about the gospel...

and about this time that has come?”

“**Immediately.... Immediately....**”

Mark is not just repeating himself because his Greek is limited... he says exactly what needs to be said.
“**Immediately... it's NOW, now's the time!**”

You'd notice a few other things as well. You'd notice that on every page Jesus is moving back and forth from the crowd to quietness. There's a crowd on every page...

Sometimes the crowd is chasing him.

Sometimes the crowd is in the way... His mom can't get to him, a woman who's been bleeding for years can't get to him... four guys with a sick friend can't get to him... all on account of the crowd.

Sometimes he calls the crowd to him to teach them.

He gathers the crowd to feed them.

He responds.

But in between the responses, he runs. He gets away. He deliberately avoids attracting a crowd and sometimes, when he sees them coming, heads the other way. He goes off to places where he's not such a celebrity. He gets in boats... he goes up on mountains... to houses where he can't be found.

On every page... it's back and forth... between people and some lonely place. He sends his disciples out... then when they get back he says, “**Come away with me to a quiet place and rest for a while.**” He starts

his ministry out in public getting baptized, moves to the desert, then heads out to minister... forth and back and forth.

That's what took place in our gospel reading today, which is really a continuation of last week's story. It was the Sabbath and he was teaching with authority in the Synagogue and it was connecting in deep ways with the people.

It happens... when a person, a teacher, is whole, Spirit flows through them and moves into others at deep levels.

But he doesn't just teach... because someone interrupts his teaching, remember? Someone who is possessed and starts yelling and screaming and the spirit asks a question that is very important to Mark. (Remember we're trying to read between the lines.)

The spirit says... **"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth... have you come to destroy us?"** And on every page of Mark's gospel... there is a line about demons or possession and on every page Jesus has power and authority over them... and Mark answers the question... **"Yes... Jesus is here to destroy all that is in opposition to God... evil... sin... death."**

And I should detour here and say I know lots of us don't quite know what to do with all this talk of demons, do we? We tend to read real quickly, right over them. And I want to share just this one thought... We err when we go to far with this in either direction.

There are some folks who come to see a demon behind every bush... or every bad feeling... or in every place of conflict or in anything that goes wrong. That's not only bad theology, immature understanding of the spiritual realm, but I've known it to be very harmful to persons who get caught up in it.

But even as we acknowledge that... and even that we know some things they didn't know in the first century... and we do... you know. Some of you will be very bothered by what I'm about to say, but you know things Jesus didn't know.

Jesus is not walking around pretending to be human. He's a first century man. He's not sitting there talking to his disciples, saying, **"Fellas, it's sort of like it is with Quantum Physics..."** and when he sees their blank stares he changes and says, **"Sheep... let's talk about sheep."** (a great line from Milton Brasher-Cunningham, friend, poet, and preacher)

He doesn't look at someone short of breath and say, **"This person is clearly struggling with congestive heart failure."** He doesn't know what that is. He doesn't know that the earth is revolving around the sun... It would be a heresy for us to think that.

He is a human being... not God in a Jesus suit. He has **"emptied himself,"** as Paul would say. So, Jesus... like everyone, assumed evil spirits were to blame for most every illness.

But even as we acknowledge that... it'd be a mistake and unbiblical and entirely closed-minded to say there is nothing to this. Nothing that opposes us. No spirit that can oppress.

It is on every page of Mark... **"Jesus goes preaching in their synagogues and... casting out demons."** There is a demon on every page.

You can't look at the evil in the Bible, in history and the world and in you and say, **"there's not a spiritual battle taking place."**

But... what Mark does is affirm, **"Jesus has authority over all that... and, yes, he's come to do away with it"....** to remove whatever possesses us.

Jesus commands the evil spirit to come out... and that makes quite an impression... news spreads all over town and that sets up today's gospel story, which underlines for us all these themes in Mark.

"As soon as they left the synagogue..." They went to Peter's house, where his mother-in-law is sick with a fever... Jesus goes to her, takes her by the hand and the fever leaves her and she begins to **"wait on them."**

Now that's what I call a great mother-in-law.

Actually, reading it carefully and between the lines, Mark isn't just telling us what happened... or certainly not that women ought to be waiting on men... he is preaching to us through her. The word he uses, he uses sparingly in his gospel. The word is **"she ministered to them."**

Get this... in the wilderness, after the Jesus faces and is exhausted by temptation... the angels come and... **"minister to him."**

The women who stood at the foot of the cross were described as those who had **"ministered to him."** And Jesus says, **"I came to minister to others... not to be ministered to."**

So... she is healed, Peter's mother-in-law... made whole... and then she gets up and starts to minister. Our sickness is taken away and we do not stay in bed... we get up and we serve others. She does

Then... when it gets dark... here comes the crowd. Why then? Why do they wait until Saturday night? It's because a healer isn't allowed to heal on the Sabbath and you couldn't walk too far or carry too much on the Sabbath... So, **"after sunset..."** here they came. They brought, **"the sick... and the demon-possessed."**

And I love the way Mark says it, **"The whole town gathered at the door."** You can imagine it can't you? ... long line...

Someone has a crippled child.

Someone else has a husband out of his mind.

There's someone with an infant that won't eat.

It's a long line. Sick folks... injured folks... just the stuff that life does to us. And there are those sick of soul...

Jesus opens the door and looks out and sees the crowd and knows... it's going to be a long evening. Mark says, **"He healed many... who had various diseases... and he cast out many demons."**

And reading closely I want to ask Mark... **when you said many did you say many because not everyone walked away free of what ailed them?"** Because I know we don't generally walk away so easily... not everyone gets a miracle. It's just something I'm asking Mark as I read.

It's a long evening... and noisy... Everyone talking in that house with adobe walls... words bouncing everywhere. It'd be like it is in the Narthex after church... lots of voices... talking excitedly all night.

And so, here he goes again. The next morning, while it's still dark, he goes off to a solitary place where he prays. Back and forth and back and forth. Jesus never, not once in Mark's gospel, fails to go find his center again.

He returns to The Source.

He communes with God.

He gets with God... talks... listens... rests.

We don't know what that time looked like but I think I can make an educated and imaginative guess. I think Jesus probably did something bodily... something intentional with his body. He bowed, he knelt, he lifted his hands... maybe lay prostrate... probably all that.

I suspect, he prayed several Psalms... maybe some that were his favorites... **"O Lord come to my assistance... make haste to help me."**

And he for sure interceded for some people. **"God, help Peter not to be such a goober."** **"Matthew is so controlling; Lord, give him awareness."** **"I know mother is worried... help her understand."**

He talked to God... and listened for God's guidance. But, I don't think Jesus withdrew to get his next assignment... Marching orders... He withdrew to get God. He withdrew so he could know again that he belonged to God.

He was human and felt and knew everything you know and feel. Lostness... confusion... fear... exhaustion. The crowds really took it out of him... And he felt overwhelmed in the midst of them, fatigued by them... So, he always pulled away to find a center again and be restored there and see again what was true.

That's what he did and that's where the disciples found him. **"Hey Jesus, everyone's looking for you."** Of course they are... we're all dying to be with someone so centered in God that all the knots within us are untied by just being in that presence.

We're all looking for Jesus and for followers of Jesus who are authentically human... who welcome us... and heal us... Folks that when you're with them somehow make you glad to be you.

“Everyone is looking for you, Jesus.”

“Well, then let's go preach somewhere else... cuz' that's why I've come.” Back and forth and back and forth... again.

Jesus... and Mark's pen... show us the way. We go forth and we come back and we go forth and we come back and we go forth.

The crowd is out there and it's big and it's complex. It's full of everything that life is full of... Opportunity and responsibility. Folks who need you because they're broken. And folks who will be hard on you, because they're broken.

The whole town, really... and in our day... the whole world. Political, worldwide realities. And the person who offices next to you going through a divorce. Iran and Iris are in the line at your door.

There are the demands of your family-life... and then there are the needs of Matt and Katie Sciba, who need our help on a medical boat in Southeast Asia. Look out the door ... at the line. There are bills to pay and there are children to love... problems to solve... and demons of all kinds to deal with.

There is so much good out there... and so much evil.

And we are called to go forth. Jesus has taken us by the hand... healed us... helped us up... and we must minister now. Not later... now, the time is now... at once.

But we must also come back... back to our God, in solitude. If we don't, we won't be worth a thing as we go forth and, probably, we'll just make matters worse and the crowd sicker. That's what happens when religion goes forth without being grounded in the reality of God. They have absolutes but not the Absolute (R. Rohr) and ... the world pays a terrible price.

I suspect, most of us would say that one of these moves, one or the other, comes more naturally. Some of you instinctively go forth. I, on the other hand, see the crowd and go looking for a quiet place. I'm allergic to crowds.

I think it was Dostoevsky who said in his novel of folks like me, something like, **“They love humanity, it's just people they can't stand.”** (No, not really... well, sort of... but not really... yeah.)

I'm just fond of the quiet places... of pulling aside. And some of you are passionate about going forth and we need one another... prophetically and priestly. I have to invite you to be still and be restored and you have to give me a kick in the pants to get up and go forth.

If you don't come back to God, there won't be any “you” to go forward with. Folks will come looking for you, an honest- to-goodness, loving “you” and they'll find someone fearful or driven or angry or worn out... who doesn't have any idea who she is... and no, absolutely no, awareness of what is driving her. You've got to come back.

And if I don't go forth, well... I'm not following Jesus, am I? ... because he came to minister. And the crowd will remain hungry and hurt... or at least part of it... and the place of joyful, restful prayer will become a tomb.

It is by love

and in love

and for love that we are saved.

Love always goes forth... or... it isn't love and what you have isn't salvation.

So... we go forth... out there... into the crowd. And... we come back... into God. And we go forth... Back and forth, following Jesus the whole way. Amen.