

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,

BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2018

Brother John entered the 'Monastery of Silence' and the Chief Priest said, "Brother, this is a silent monastery; you are welcome here as long as you like, but you may not speak until I direct you to do so."

Brother John lived in the monastery for a full year before the Chief Priest said to him:

"Brother John, you have been here a year now, you may speak two words."

Brother John said, "Hard Bed."

"I'm sorry to hear that" the Chief Priest said. "We will get you a better bed."

The next year, Brother John was called by the Chief Priest. "You may say another two words Brother John."

"Cold Food." said Brother John, and the Chief Priest assured him that the food would be better in the future.

On his third anniversary at the monastery, the Chief Priest again called Brother John into his office.

"Two words you may say today."

"I Quit." said Brother John.

"It is probably best." said the Chief Priest. "All you have done since you got here is complain."<sup>i</sup>

It's difficult to keep silent in the face of adversarial situations, and even more difficult to find a quiet place to

contemplate the breaks and divisions that separate us as human beings. We see in this morning's reading from *The Gospel of Mark* that Jesus looks for a place to pray after being confronted by groups and individuals, including his own disciples, who are seeking his healing presence and touch. Jesus has just come from healing the man possessed by a demon, when Peter approaches him with the news that his mother-in-law is ill (not many folks realize that some of the disciples were married, Peter for one, which gives a whole new spin on the need to be celibate in the Roman Catholic and other churches). Jesus, always compassionate, goes to the woman's home, and lifting her up, heals her of her fever; she in turn

gets busy and, not wasting any time or energy, begins to serve the disciples and Jesus. Soon all manner of ill and possessed within the region are brought to the woman's door, where Jesus heals them, casting out many demons scattered amongst the sick. We see that he would not allow the demons to speak, for as we learned last week, they knew him. It's interesting to note that Jesus does such miraculous things, yet he claims that he does not want anyone to know that he has done them. There is kind of a double standard; yet, as we have mentioned, this is all part of Mark's agenda, the messianic secret of who Jesus is and when folks will not only know about it, but realize how

important it is to their lives once they embrace it fully.

After Jesus has healed countless followers, while it is still dark, he goes off on his own. It's hard to know if Mark wants us to think that Jesus merely slips away, while he can, under the cover of darkness, or that the darkness itself is a clue that, despite all he has accomplished, evil still lurks around every corner. Yet Jesus does find a way, not to sleep, but to go off and pray in a deserted place. The word used here in Greek is that of a "desert wilderness, not a forest wilderness—wilderness that has special meaning for Jews. It was in the wilderness that God shaped the Israelites—redeemed them—

made them into the People of God. John the Baptist called people to repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness that Jesus triumphed over Satan's deadly temptations. God often does God's best work in the wilderness. This should give us hope as we experience our wilderness moments—times when things seem bleak and hopeless. It could be that God is using our wilderness experience to reshape our lives—to save us and to make us whole.

The deserted place to which Jesus goes to pray is not desert—there is no desert in the vicinity of Capernaum (the town where they have gathered). Rather, the place

where Jesus goes is spiritually akin to the desert wilderness—a place where he can be free from distractions—a place where he can give himself unreservedly to prayer—a place where he can find strength from the One in whose service he has come.”<sup>ii</sup> Clearly he needs the time and the silence for renewal and strength to carry on, because it is his intention to do just that. He tells the disciples when they come looking for him that they all should be on their way to the neighboring towns, because he has a message for those places also, and because this has always been his stated mission: to heal the sick and to proclaim the good news of the breaking in of God’s kingdom.

“Note the outward spiral of Jesus’ ministry. He began in Capernaum—and then went to neighboring villages—and now goes throughout Galilee. Throughout this journey, Jesus preaches and exorcizes. The two go together. We can learn from Jesus at this point. The church today often finds itself polarized regarding its mission. Are we preachers or healers? Should we emphasize evangelism or benevolence? Should we focus on the health of the body or the soul? If we follow Jesus’ example, we will do both.

This is the last instance of Jesus’ preaching that Mark records in this Gospel. Soon he will appoint the twelve to be his apostles, and he will



send them to ‘proclaim the message.’ From this point forward, we hear a great deal about Jesus teaching but nothing about his preaching. It seems that he has transferred the preaching role to the disciples, who will soon become the church.

There is a lesson for us here. As Christ’s church, we are legitimately involved in a host of activities—running food pantries for the hungry and shelters for the homeless—digging wells in primitive villages—counseling couples who are having marriage difficulties—etc. Our core mission, however, is preaching—proclaiming the message—saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.’ The message,

from the first chapter of *Mark* is clear: ‘Repent, and believe in the good news.’”<sup>iii</sup> In this case, I believe that “to repent” means to do just what the disciples were encouraging Jesus to do, that is, to turn around, get up and get going! There was a lot of good news to be shared, and the people to whom Jesus spoke were eager to hear some of it. That makes good sense, no? Aren’t we all ready for some good news? The good news of God in Christ is that God is with us, God will save us from all our afflictions, God loves us, God wants to be in relationship with us, God is constantly trying to heal the world around us as well as heal us, God is merciful, God is full of grace, God is just, God is gracious. If you are a

preacher, anyone of those realities makes for a good sermon. Put them all in one sermon and it will be hard to find a subject to preach on come the weeks ahead! What more can one say after one proclaims God's good qualities and intentions for us? Is there anything left to say?

Apparently Mark believes so as he graces us with yet another 15 some chapters about the teachings and works of Jesus. We are still, after five weeks of Epiphany, in only the first chapter, so we have a long way to go in our understanding of who Jesus was for the people of his day and who he is to be for those of us who follow him in this era. What did we learn from his preaching and teaching in this first chapter of *Mark*?

Among other things we learned, as the preacher and writer David Lose proclaims, that “God wants to set free all of us so that we might live into our God-given identity and potential, claiming our calling as children of God, and joining God in the mission to love and bless the world.”<sup>iv</sup> This was what Jesus was doing in his ministry in Capernaum as he healed all those who came to see him by night with their many infirmities and hopes for a better and more energetic life. He was setting them free to be what God had called them to be.

I don't know if you have ever thought of your life in this way? Have you ever wished to just be free to do

something different, something more real, something more fulfilling? Has it ever crossed your mind that remaining in your current state of affairs could be making you unwell? What would it take to move forward? Certainly a lot of prayer; and time, also. Even Jesus needed a break to move on to what he believed he was called to do. I think that one of the signs of the in-breaking of God's kingdom is that we find ourselves free to do and say what was holding us back in our personal and spiritual lives. We see it, for instance, when our vocabulary starts to change, when we begin to use words like love, intentionally, mercy, grace, spirit-filled, kindness, calling, heartfelt. These are Spirit language;

they are not the usual themes we carry with us to the breakfast table with friends or the coffee-klatch with neighbors. We often hear them used in church, but when we hear them outside of church walls, we get a glimpse of what it is like when the beloved community of God, as Dr. King called it, found its way into the world at large. And thank God where the words are spoken the deeds that embody them often take place. We are encouraged, as St. James writes to us in his epistle, "Therefore be doers of the words and not hearers only." Hence, you and I have received our call for today and the days ahead. The poet and painter Jan Richardson gives us these words to help us focus on the task. She

writes, “People I love are hurting. So in light of this week’s passage from Mark’s Gospel, I wanted to write a blessing especially with them in mind—a blessing for healing, a big blessing, a blessing wide enough and deep enough to match their need.

What came was this: a blessing small enough to carry in the hand or in the heart. If you are in need, may this be for you a word in the wound, in the illness, in the ache. May you be made well.

## **And All Be Made Well** ***A Healing Blessing***

That each ill  
be released from you  
and each sorrow

be shed from you  
and each pain  
be made comfort for you  
and each wound  
be made whole in you

that joy will  
arise in you  
and strength will  
take hold of you  
and hope will  
take wing for you  
and all be made well.<sup>v</sup>

If you still do not feel moved or know where to start in bringing God's healing message to others, take a cue from Bette and offer someone you know who might need it a "Care Bear." It will brighten their day and yours. If needs be, take one for



yourself to remind you to reach out and help others in their time of need. Above all do something, be the healer of the universe and of the lives that exist in it. We're counting on you to be all that you can be as a Disciple of Christ.

Amen.

(The Rev.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.  
Pastor

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.jokesoftheday.net/joke--Breaking-The-Silence-/201612129>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-129-39/>

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Lose, David @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/epiphany-5-b-freedom-for/>

<sup>v</sup> Richardson, Jan @ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2015/02/01/epiphany-5-that-all-be-made-well/>