

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Like the previous two Sundays, as you heard, today’s Gospel also comes from Mark, which is a pretty straight-forward and basic account. There’s not much “dilly-dallying” in Mark; in fact, a favorite adverb used early in this text is “immediately.” You get the impression that Jesus is driven, an agent of God on a mission – there’s some urgency to his work of teaching and healing.

The Gospel of John begins with a long prologue pointing to Jesus as being pre-existent with the Father God. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both have ancestral records of Jesus and both have stories of his birth.

Mark’s Gospel has none of this – Mark begins his story when Jesus is already thirty years old. Mark tells us how John the Baptist announced that Jesus was on the way. Then, in just a few sentences, Mark tells us about Jesus’ baptism.

Two more sentences tell us of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and then that Jesus began preaching and calling some disciples to help him.

Then, we are offered a somewhat lengthier report about how Jesus astonished people with his preaching and, more than that, by the way he delivered a man who had “an unclean spirit”; and with that, we are led into the scripture portion which I read just a few moments ago.

Mind you, all of this comes to us in roughly a page-and-a-half of our Bibles. It takes up less space and time than a report on what happened in the Super Bowl last weekend. What does Gospel-writer Mark have in mind? Obviously, we can’t read the author’s mind, but I get the feeling that Mark can’t wait to get into the story of what Jesus was doing.

The Gospel of Mark is very much an action gospel. It’s as if Mark were saying, “The world needed Jesus. People were waiting for him, whether they knew it or not.” Then Mark proceeds to show us that the world to which Jesus came was a world out of joint. It was a world in trouble, a world that needed a Savior.

The great 20th-century Russian poet and novelist Boris Pasternak said that the first-century world into which Jesus came was “a flea market of borrowed gods and conquered peoples, a bargain basement on two floors ... a mass of filth convoluted in a triple knot as in an intestinal obstruction.”

But then, Pasternak said, “into this tasteless heap of gold and marble, He came” [that is, Jesus Christ], “light and clothed in an aura, emphatically human, deliberately provincial, Galilean, and at that moment gods and nations ceased to be and man came into being.”*

The novelist is telling us in his graphic way that humanity was living in “a flea market,” a “tasteless heap of gold and marble,” but that in spite of all the power of the Roman Empire, Jesus changed everything by his coming.

This, very likely, is what Mark, too, is telling us. Many Bible scholars suggest that Mark’s gospel was originally directed especially to the Roman audience, to people who lived in the seductive, distracting glamour of the imperial city, and Mark wants them to know the truth about the human condition.

Life was cheap and easily sacrificed to the purposes of entertainment or emperors or the pleasures of the wealthy. And with it all, most people were enduring many kinds of ailments of body, mind and spirit, ailments that seemed to be everywhere.

And then, Jesus came. He spoke eternal good sense. He brought hope, integrity and purpose to life – and clearly, he cared, and so the needy ones came to him.

When Jesus came to the house of Simon Peter and Andrew, Simon's mother-in-law lay sick of a fever. Fevers were often a life-and-death matter in that time and climate. Jesus entered the sickroom, took the woman by the hand, and lifted her up. Mark tells us in a very matter-of-fact way that "the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (Mark 1:31).

There's something delightfully simple and unpretentious in this story. No one runs out onto the street to announce that a healing has taken place; no news reporters are brought in to ask questions and prepare a story for broader consumption. This mother-in-law does what is most natural to her: now that she's well, she becomes the hostess and serves those in her home.

The story continues in this same mood of the mundane and the miraculous. It's evening, at sundown, when sentiment and memory and loneliness so easily come. So the community brings to Jesus "all who were sick or possessed with demons" (Mark 1:32). The good news spreads quickly. Soon, Mark reports, "the whole city was gathered around the door" (Mark 1:33).

Mark hasn't time to give a detailed list of the problems and ailments; he says simply that Jesus "cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (Mark 1:34). We don't know how many the word "many" designates, whether it is 10, 30, 50 or 100.

Nor do we know all Mark means in the diagnostic report "various diseases," but clearly, it covers a wide variety. We cannot estimate all that is implied in the phrase "many demons"; it's likely that this term covers all sorts of agonies of mind and spirit – some that afflict all of us on occasion, and some that afflict others every day.

Whatever, Jesus broke the power of such strange darkness and terror. Jesus then retired for the night, but we read that in the morning, "while it was still very dark," Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place so he could pray.

He had to restore his spirit in order to be ready for the challenges of a new day. There were other towns, Jesus told Simon and the others, where he must go to proclaim the message – other towns where he will preach and cast out demons.

This is an important scripture for us to read on this Sunday as we soon approach Ash Wednesday and Lent. This scripture tells us, in dramatic ways, why Jesus came. It moves from the warm and lovely sentiment that accompanies a Jesus account to a day-by-day description of the world into which Jesus came, a world out of joint, and why, therefore, Jesus needed to come.

It reminds us that Jesus met with his Father sometimes late at night and often early in the morning because he sought reinforcement to meet the great needs of our world.

Where Matthew and Luke tell us that God came to our world by way of Jesus Christ, and John tells us that Jesus was with God, was in fact God as the Word, the One who would come to save the world, Mark tells us the kind of world into which Jesus came.

Mark's gospel thrusts us right into the maelstrom of living – of villages where the sick are everywhere, and of cities where the demonic so often asserts itself, sometimes subtly and sometimes arrogantly. That is, Mark tells us that Jesus came because we need him; we couldn't survive without him.

This is a holy reminder, with Lent some ten days away. You and I – we who call ourselves Christians and who want so much to be worthy of that name – we're the ones who represent Jesus in this world that is out of joint.

We are the people who represent our Lord in a world that needs him just as much as it did 20 centuries ago, when he came physically to be among us. This surely is what Mark wants us to know – because our world is still out of joint.

It still needs Jesus, with his great love and mercy and compassion for our human need. And now, you and I are part of the delivery team. We are called to help in the healing of our world. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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**The Boris Pasternak quote in this sermon is from Doctor Zhivago (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), p. 43.*