

Splashed in the Face

Mark 1:16-28

Lent 1 – O Healing River – Healing Stories from Mark

By Julie Bergen (Feb 18, 2018)

On this first Sunday of Lent, we embark on a journey of reflection and preparation as we follow Jesus and his disciples from the beginning of his ministry through to the passion story and the drama of Easter. This season we will be using the book of Mark and its many stories of healing and of water. The group that has been meeting on Wednesday mornings has already begun reading Mark together and has started to identify the themes that the Gospel writer emphasizes.

Our scripture reading today begins in Mark 1 but starts at the part of the story where we hear of Jesus walking along the shore, calling his first disciples and then attending Synagogue and healing a man who was marginalized because of an unclean spirit. These themes come up often in Mark, showing Jesus' mission of calling disciples, providing healing and exorcisms of marginalized people, and preaching the sovereignty of God. In my preparation I referred to two commentaries on Mark, first from Ched Meyer's blog, and second from Jose Pallares' book "A Poor Man Called Jesus". Both commentators emphasize a social reading of the gospel of Mark showing how Jesus' ministry was closely connected to the society in which he lived.

But before we get too far into today's scripture, I want to take note of the first 15 verses of Mark as it is different from what we see in the other gospels. In the first verse of Mark Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. There is no mystery, the gospel writer starts here. In Mark, Jesus most often refers to himself as "the son of man", the opposite of oppressive power, but rather a grassroots guide springing forth from common life. To be sure, it would be even less oppressive written, "child of humanity", though for today I'll chalk that one up to translation. (ask our Prime Minister, perhaps its "child of people-kind")

In these opening verses, absent is the genealogy connecting Jesus back through his ancestors to Jesse the father of David. What we have instead is Mark's description of John's ministry of which Jesus is a follower. In fact, he places them together at the Jordan River where Jesus is baptized by John, and where the Spirit of God descends on Jesus and calls him beloved. The Jordan River may remind us of another teacher and disciple, Elijah and Elisha who were parted at the Jordan River when Elijah went up to heaven and Elisha steps into his shoes.

In these first few verses of Mark, pains are taken to ensure we recognize not Jesus' earthly connections, but his connection to God, his role as a follower of John who preached God's forgiveness. Then in verse 14, when John is arrested, Jesus comes to Galilee and proclaims the good news. His teacher has been taken and Jesus immediately steps into his ministry. This immediacy continues in the entire book of Mark – Jesus has no time to delay – he begins his ministry proclaiming the good news of God, saying "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near". And the first thing he

does is walk along the water and call his first disciples.

When I hear the story of Jesus calling to Simon and Andrew, I wonder that they left their nets and followed him. It shows such immediate trust and a desire to follow Jesus on the path of change that he offered. I imagine farmers standing by a combine in the middle of a wheat field during the harvest. If Jesus called out for them to follow, would they walk away from the commitments and responsibilities, to family and community, to bank loans, to their goals? But the question of whether our faith could immediately match that of Jesus' disciples is not what the Gospel's writer wants us to understand from our reading. For Mark, the important thing is to emphasize how Jesus intended to restore God's justice. And part of this was putting the spotlight on how we care for those who are without power in our society.

Trouble in the Text

The fishermen of Jesus' time faced many difficulties. They were among the most marginalized people in the society of Palestine, the fish they caught was the source of food and livelihood for their families but had been taken over by Roman rule as a source of export and taxation requiring levies and leases that placed fishermen in extreme poverty. The nets they cast needed mending on many levels. The fishermen who heard Jesus' call were struggling and responded to the hope for God's justice that they recognized in Jesus' mission. Their desire was for healing that extended to their livelihoods. I've always wondered what their father Zebedee felt about his sons leaving him sitting in the boat as they walked away to follow Jesus. But given the tenuous situation of these fishermen, perhaps he simply wished he could go too.

Trouble in the World

Those farmer's by their combine are also a part of a net of society that needs mending. Many settlers came to the prairies, many of them from Christian denominations, in response to government initiatives to bring farmers to the land. As Mennonites, many of our own ancestors came from the Ukraine to settle in Manitoba and Saskatchewan because they faced persecution and violence and wished to settle in a place that allowed them to live in safety, and practice their religion, and maintain their culture. What we didn't realize, or what we haven't always acknowledged, was that when we settled this land, there were already Indigenous people here who depended on the land to support their families, and practice their Spirituality, and live according to their culture. In seeking our own security, Indigenous people were marginalized, with terrible repercussions for the cultural and personal well-being of our Indigenous neighbours.

I speak these words in the shadow of the death of Colten Boushie and the trial of Gerald Stanley. I call to mind his mother, Debbie Baptiste, and the heartbreak she is living through. I think of the Red Pheasant First Nation and Colten Boushie's community. How much has been lost with the life of this young man. And yet his death did not occur in a single incident, but in a societal structure that has continually

reinforced a racial power imbalance. Our complicity allows violence to occur, and violence is not just a sudden death; but a demeaning glance, a discriminatory policy, misguided guidance for choosing 'appropriate' friends.

When Jesus called the first disciples to follow him they recognized that he intended to bring change, and they wanted to be part of that shift. We also long for healing waters to ease the drought of broken relationships, racism, and misunderstanding. Into this desire, Mark speaks of Jesus' first healing.

Grace in the Text

At the very beginning of his ministry, with the first of his new disciples in tow, Jesus performed an exorcism within the Synagogue on the Sabbath. Now this man was considered by the Scribes as outside of the stronghold of religious decency and therefore outside of God's concern. We also need to understand that the people who were there accepted the Scribes as leaders with wisdom whom they trusted. And while we might feel uncomfortable with those assumptions about people who were sick, our own society still has much to learn about supporting those for whom mental health is a challenge. The man with the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God. He challenges Jesus, but immediately expresses trepidation “have you come to destroy us”? In this first healing story in Mark, Jesus heals the man almost in reaction to this challenge, “Be silent, and come out of him”! And while we don't see here the forgiveness of sins that we see in many of the healing stories in Mark, Jesus' acts of healing bring together the forgiveness of sin with the liberation of people's bodies. Just as he begins by healing this man with the unclean spirit who was marginalized in his society and not considered even worthy of healing, Jesus brings deliverance from burden and failure. Pallares says that Jesus' forgiveness demolishes whatever excludes people from acceptance. Whatever ways our society fails to accept us, whatever ways we fail to accept ourselves, Jesus' forgiveness is at work.

In this story we see Jesus set against the leaders, the Scribes, who were the literate members of Jewish society. In performing this healing act, Jesus raised the people's curiosity, helping them to accept Jesus as a new authority, and providing a groundswell of support for him to continue his compassionate ministry. This is important staging – it is not just a healing story, but an opportunity for Jesus to initiate his ministry in a way that washes over all those in attendance, gasping with surprise as the assumptions about power and merit were washed overboard. Jesus is showing from the very beginning that he is not there to weigh people down with more rules and precepts. Rather, Jesus came to buoy up those who felt they were sinking, he came bearing happiness.

This healing was calculated to incite conflict, to force the Scribes and the people to reconsider what was assumed and what was correct. We often read scripture and when we get to edgy, uncomfortable bits we let our brains wash away the rough edges. But when we listen to this reading we can feel the tension in the Synagogue as Jesus loosens the moors that seemed firmly held. Jesus didn't come to question the social order but to undermine it and sink it completely. Jesus is not playing within the rules set

out by society, he is living by faith, leading from God, and initiating a whole new way of looking at life. What is at stake is acceptance of God who is on the side of human beings, especially for those who are in need.

I am reminded of the Christian Ethics class I took with Harry Huebner at CMBC. We were challenged to choose a social issue and to consider it in light of our faith, seeking a vantage point other than those laid out by society. It is too easy for us to assume that the choices that our society gives us are the only options – pro-choice or pro-life? In these verses, throughout the book of Mark, Jesus is telling us that we do not need to accept these constructs. We can choose other. We can choose to be guided by our faith, guided by creativity, guided by relationship, guided by God's healing waters that promise to wash over the land bringing restoration and right relationship.

Grace in the World

Recently we heard from Dave Neufeld about the multitude of stone carvings and rock formations near Herschel, SK, indicating the spiritual practices of generations of Indigenous people. As treaty people, seeking to continue on a healing path with our Indigenous neighbours, it is important that we continue to educate ourselves and to listen to their wisdom, history, and experience. Just as Jesus had the ability to walk up to the disciples and initiate relationship, we too, can expand our circles in ways we might never have imagined; developing relationship, seeking trust and good-faith. Seeking healing waters.

This story speaks to us of healing in all situations. As a spiritual care provider, I bring awareness to the fact that while healing can not always mean a cure and the restoration of physical health, healing can be emotional and spiritual, and this healing can transform a person's experience. Jesus' words flow into our experience, recognizing that suffering takes many forms and that we require healing from the misery of social, moral, and physical pain.

Jesus continues to call us today. We are called to follow him, and to bring our lives into the circle of God's care. That choice to follow Jesus also calls us to care for the earth and for the marginalized members of our society. When we experience marginalization, and the loss of personal power, we hear Jesus' call, just as the disciples did. And when we recognize in our own experience the complicity with the marginalization of others, Jesus calls us to help bring God's justice and healing.

Let us pray:

God of strength and compassion,
Wash over us with your desire for justice.
When we are pushed to the side,
strengthen us with the desire for change.
And when we push others aside,
help bring us back into right relationship.
Bring your healing waters.
Amen

Benediction

As we each follow our path

From these doors and into our week

May we do so with open eyes and open hearts

And a desire for God's justice to come on earth.

Go in Peace to love and serve.

Amen.