

Lent C2
 February 21, 2016
 Sermon Series- "Walking with Jesus: Healed and Healing"
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
 David Noble

Mark 1.21-32

²¹*They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.*
²²*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* ²³*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,* ²⁴*and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."* ²⁵*But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"*
²⁶*And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.* ²⁷*They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."* ²⁸*At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

²⁹*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.* ³⁰*Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.* ³¹*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

³²*That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.*

Last week we walked with Jesus from Galilee in the north, where he was living in Nazareth, to the banks of the Jordan River 50 miles to the south, near Jericho, where he was baptized. There Jesus lined up with all the other pilgrims who gathered to hear John the Baptist preach and to be baptized by him in the River. Jesus was making a statement with his baptism- that he wanted to be part of a great reunion, to bring the message of God's forgiveness and peace to all people, that they would turn again toward God who loved them no matter what.

After his baptism Jesus walked into the wilderness alone, where he was tested. For many long days he reflected on his call from God to begin his ministry, to devote himself to God's power of grace and mercy and love, rather than be tempted to use his power for himself. Strengthened in his spirit, Jesus began his return walk to the north, to Galilee, 50 miles back to his hometown of Nazareth.

Nazareth was a little town, a wide spot in the road, we might call it. When he arrived he went straight to the synagogue to worship. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he read the words about the day that was coming, the day when the blind would see, when captives would be released, when good news would come to the poor, when the Lord's anointed would appear. He said that day had come, that scripture had been fulfilled in him.

At first the people in the synagogue wondered. Wasn't he Joseph's son? But he was claiming to be the Messiah- that was blasphemy, as far as they were concerned. They were incensed, so they drove him out of the synagogue, his own people drove him out past the edge of town to a cliff where they threatened to kill him. But he kept on walking, heading north to the Sea of Galilee, to a little town on the shore called Capernaum.

It is a 24 mile walk from Nazareth to Capernaum, through a beautiful valley with mountains on the right and the left. From the top of these mountains you can see half of the Sea of Galilee and it's said you can see $\frac{3}{4}$ of the towns where Jesus would minister over the next 3 years. Jesus arrived in Capernaum, a village of 1000 people, and here he saw Peter and Andrew and James and John fishing at the seashore. He called them to be his disciples. In fact seven of the twelve disciples came from Capernaum. This would be Jesus' new home.

When the Sabbath arrived Jesus went to the synagogue. He was asked to speak and he amazed this synagogue too with his authoritative teaching. But there was a sick man at worship that day. The people said he had an unclean spirit. The man cried out, with a voice that was not his own. Jesus spoke, the man was healed, and the people were amazed, astounded, disturbed.

Jesus went home with Peter, perhaps living there for his first few days in town, and Peter's mother was sick with a fever. Jesus healed her too. And later that evening everyone who was sick or possessed with demons came to Peter's home for Jesus to heal them.

Of course it's never easy to be sick, but in Jesus' day illness was just the beginning of suffering.

One time Jesus healed a blind man who was accused by his neighbors and temple leaders of being a sinner and the son of parents who must have sinned in such a way that their son's blindness was punishment. In the book of Job, Job's friends promoted that way of understanding- "you get what you deserve," they said.

In those days there was no knowledge of viruses or bacteria, no awareness of conditions like epilepsy or birth defects, no appreciation for mental illness that is beyond self-control, no medicines or trained health professionals. Something must be behind an illness, though, so demons, unclean spirits, were sometimes blamed. People believed there was another reality, a substantial reality beyond what could be seen and touched. Unusual behavior, sudden symptoms, intractable diseases were assigned to the realm of the spirit, to demonic spirits that seemed powerful and uncontrollable and malicious.

When people were sick, especially sick with demons, where could they turn for hope? People suffering from leprosy lost their jobs, were separated from their families, lived on their own outside of town, had to announce their illness whenever they walked down a street. A child who suffered from epilepsy would hurt himself as he fell down with a seizure and others would just watch from a distance. A woman who had a history of bleeding was considered unclean. Anyone who was sick could not be touched, lest their family and friends be contaminated by the demons.

It's Jesus' first day of ministry and he's already known as a healer who can reduce a fever, put a person back in their right mind, who makes house calls and who gladly receives patients after hours. Healing must have been a dream come true for people who knew nothing of viruses and bacteria. Healing must have been truly miraculous for a community without medicines and technology and highly trained specialists. No wonder that once the word got out, everyone who needed a healing showed up.

We could walk down Park Street today and within a block come across various people who are physically and mentally sick and, sometimes, emotionally troubled. We might hear them talking to someone when no one else is nearby, and they aren't wearing EarPods for a cellphone. In Jesus' day these people might have been thought to be possessed by a demon. But we know they are dealing with an illness, an illness that might even be treatable.

And while we are much more sophisticated than people in Jesus' time, people today still ask what they did to deserve to be sick. And when particularly horrible diseases strike, like AIDS, there are those who blame the victim.

And we do still use the word "demon" when we describe some of our challenges. But we use it to help name the habits and thoughts and influences that have power over us, that seem to take control, that make us feel weak.

Maybe we have a sense of anger that boils over too often. Maybe its greed or lust or gluttony that leads us to do what we don't want to do. And demons can also be called addictions. Several hundred people come to this church every week seeking a healing from drugs and alcohol. Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and other 12 step programs are efforts to find healing of body, mind, and spirit.

Then there are shootings like the one in Kalamazoo, MI, yesterday that defy logic and psychology and science. People seem to be possessed, out of their minds. Maybe those folks in Jesus' day who seemed so ignorant because of their lack of knowledge did have the right idea, at least some of the time- there seems to be forces at work in human beings that can only be described as demonic.

Jesus healed the man in the synagogue who was said to be possessed. The voice coming from the man couldn't help but identify Jesus as the "Holy One of God." This happens often in the healing stories in the Bible. Jesus has power over these forces and they know it. One day Jesus' disciples saw a man being carried to the Jerusalem temple. He was unable to walk. They went up to him and he asked them for money, which they apparently didn't have. But they said they'd give him the one thing they could give. "In the name of Jesus Christ," they said, "stand up and walk." And he did.

In Jesus there is healing. Hundreds of people in the Bible are healed one way or another by him.

Healing is a complicated topic. Sometimes healing comes like a miracle. Other times the spirit and then mind are healed but the body is not. I've prayed for healing for people who have eventually died, but along the way they become stronger and more assured of God's mercy and presence, they would have said they experienced healing.

I had a friend once in a church who suffered the loss of a husband and then a son. She was overwhelmed with grief, she was wounded emotionally and spiritually to the point that she lost her trust in God. A group of us said we would pray with her, and for her—meaning that while she was unable to pray we would be her voice and pray her prayers to God for her. Eventually she was healed and she was able to worship again, but more than that, she took on a ministry of working with others who needed prayers and healing. God's power not only healed her but strengthened her to serve others in need.

That's one aspect of healing I've seen over and over. God uses others to bring healing. We walk with Jesus in our spiritual journeys. He enables us to notice those who are in need. Some of us become doctors and nurses and therapists and psychologists and a host of other professionals. But all of us, regardless of our expertise, are channels for God's healing.

When we visit with a friend in the hospital or help sustain them at home we are instruments of God's healing. When we pray with a friend who is hurting we are instruments of God's healing. When we get to know our neighbors and find ways to bring them hope and assurance in God's love, we are instruments of God's healing.

Jesus saw them everywhere, people who were sick and beleaguered and overwhelmed. He was devoted to them. He would stay up all night to heal them and free them, as we heard in the gospel story today.

The world is full of people just like that. People who need a healing. Perhaps you're one of them. Know that Jesus sees you and can heal you. Ask him to do it. Ask me, ask others, to help you.

And beyond ourselves there are more who seek relief and hope. As those who walk with Jesus, we notice them, and through us God can heal them too.