

Epiphany 5 / B  
*Which Call to Answer?*

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

7 February 2021

It's really a rather simple little story, but the reading we just heard from Mark is one of the most moving, and most challenging, parts of this Gospel. It comes from the first chapter of Mark, and it describes the second part of a sort of "typical day" in the life and ministry of Jesus. We heard the first part of this "typical day" last Sunday. Jesus is in Capernaum, a small town northeast of Nazareth, a fishing village located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee – and it's his first stop on the road since his baptism and 40-day temptation in the desert. By any standard, he's had one heck of a day: he spends the morning teaching in the synagogue and, while he's at it, driving out some unclean spirits; and then, in the afternoon and evening, healing, first Peter's mother-in-law, and then, it seems, a good percentage of the entire town. With his preaching, exorcising and healing powers on full display, Jesus impresses the socks off everybody; he is probably the most exciting thing that has happened in the small town since somebody burned down the Roman tax office. But as interesting as all that is, the really critical point, the really important thing, is what happens next.

Very early the following morning, Jesus leaves Capernaum behind and walks to a lonely place to pray. While he is there, Peter and the other disciples track him down and tell him that the whole town is searching for him. Now, there are a couple of hints in the text that something big is going on. First, Mark specifically mentions Jesus being alone in prayer only three times in his entire Gospel – and each of these times is associated with a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. Second, the Greek word used to describe the crowds searching for Jesus is "*sinister*," which implies malice or misguided motives. So it's very significant that Jesus does not return to Capernaum, but, quite suddenly and without looking back, just up and leaves.

Now, since Jesus was a big hit, this certainly wasn't a lynch mob after him – that comes later in the story. In fact, it was most likely exactly the opposite. Most likely, the town really liked and greatly appreciated what Jesus had done, and they really wanted to keep him there so he could keep on doing it. The group searching for him was probably the

first-century equivalent of a joint committee of the local ministerial alliance, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Economic Development Board.

They had been up all night, working out a package to offer Jesus that he couldn't possibly refuse. They wanted him to set up shop in Capernaum – establish the “Jesus of Nazareth Preaching and Healing Mission.” The pay and benefits would be significant, the hours negotiable, housing would be provided, and corporate taxes could be deferred indefinitely. What a deal!

There was no doubt that Jesus could really put the small backwater town on the map. The tourist trade and healing business would be good for everybody – think Lourdes with a money-back guarantee – the tax base would grow wonderfully, business would improve, the town would grow by leaps and bounds, and the citizens would have their own miracle worker around for the next time they got sick. It was a great proposal! A great deal for everybody! Who could possibly turn down such an offer?

Well, Jesus would.

One of the ways in which we deny Jesus' humanity – and in doing that, remove his very human life from our very human lives – is by believing that all of Jesus' decisions were easy and automatic; that it was all predestined and set in stone, that his life was no more than reading from a script. But that's not how human life works. And that's not how it happened. Jesus knew that the delegation from Capernaum was offering him security, safety, success, prosperity, and respect. These are all the things we all want, things everybody has always wanted. If he would answer their call to stay and become their resident rabbi and physician, he wouldn't have to be poor, his family wouldn't think he was crazy, he could have a normal life, he wouldn't have to be cold, hungry, or afraid for his life. In fact, his life would be easier and better in every way we are taught to consider important, even necessary.

Safety and security, success and prosperity, respect. These are the things that Jesus knew he would never have if he turned his back on the town's generous offer and he left. A difficult decision. A difficult choice. Jesus' story is our story, for many of us have been caught in just such a tough decision point.

As we all know, Jesus would not have been the first to trade challenge for security; to exchange the possibility of greatness for the assurance of competence; to swap the call of God for the rewards that come from giving the crowds what they want. Not by a long shot. No, Jesus' decision did not come without great cost, and did not come easily. It was so hard, in fact, that he did exactly the same thing he did on the night before the crucifixion – he went off by himself to pray, to think, and deliberate, to sweat out a tough decision, to decide which voice to follow: the voices of the crowd that he and the disciples could hear rolling up the hillside chanting, “We want Jesus! We want Jesus!”; or the other, quieter, still, small voice that only he could hear, the voice that said, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.”

The call of the world; or the call of God. Security; or the unknown. Stay put and play it safe; or leave and see what happens. In that deserted place outside Capernaum, Jesus had to choose. And in that moment of decision, there is a very real sense that all of Creation held its breath, waiting to see what would happen.

Of course, Jesus' story is our story – in very basic ways, it always is. We all know the power and the pull of security, prosperity, safety, success, and respect. We know how easy it is to settle – to settle for being just a little less than who we know we can be; to listen to those loud voices; to let the expectations of others rule and make the choice for us. After all, there comes a certain point in every life when questions like this begin to matter deeply; when they begin to carry a heavy cost; when things get difficult and painful; when we know that a decision, and the path it sets us on, is life-altering and, once chosen, unchangeable. And when that happens, the sense of who we are – of what it means to be the beloved child of God – can easily fade into the background. So, we have to make choices, and whether we know it or not, the Lord of heaven and earth waits to know our choice, waits to see what will happen. That's one way we live out this same story.

Another way is that we, as the Church, the community of faith, have to make pretty much the same decision that the town of Capernaum had to make. We, too, have to decide what to do about Jesus. We have to decide what to do about this guy who comes to us proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and bringing healing, and hope, and a vision of new life. In

Capernaum they decided to take the part of Jesus they liked best – a good teacher and preacher, an effective healer – and capture it, hold it, institutionalize it.

They decided to tie him down and keep him in their place, to be at their convenience, and for their purposes. They didn't want to be challenged; they wanted to be coddled. They didn't want to see deeper into his gifts of teaching and healing; didn't want to see – or even ask - what those gifts might ask of them. They just wanted to keep repeating the parts they chose to value, things they wanted. And in exchange, they were willing to offer him a very gilded cage.

Both throughout history and today, the Church has faced this temptation of trying to hire Jesus and write his job description –of assuming the Lord has been sent for our convenience, come among us as one more resource we have for carrying out our plans and meeting our desires. When we yield to that temptation, and yield we often have, we find, sooner or later, and in spite of our best intentions and efforts, that the nice house we built to contain him is empty, and that he has moved on to the next town.

To be sure, we need to know Jesus like the people in Capernaum did: we need to hear his word, and know the power, the mercy, and the grace of his healing love. We can do nothing without that. But if we stop there, if we try to limit or control where the Lord is or what he does, if we try to capture him, and hold him, and pay him to keep up the good work, then we've missed the point.

Perhaps the only person in Capernaum who really understood all of this was Peter's mother-in-law. We don't know her name, but we do know, from her, the truth. It's simple. "He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them." She didn't try to put Jesus in the medicine cabinet or in a shop down the street. No, instead, she served. Having been healed, she moved beyond herself and the gift she had been given. Faced with the decision of what to do next, she chose the Lord and his calling.

Such is our same choice as we seek to live out that part of today's Gospel. As the Church, we can try to hire Jesus to answer our call, or we can accept his call and serve him, which means to serve not ourselves, but

serve others, as he did. Mark's straight-forward words and the actions of Peter's mother-in-law make it seem simple, but it can be a hard and difficult choice, as hard as our personal choices between comfort and faithfulness, as hard as Jesus' choices between taking the cushy job or moving on.

Through the grace of God the Father, Jesus rose from prayer and told Peter and the rest that it was time to go, time to leave the safety and security of Capernaum behind, time to choose for God and move along. No doubt, the people searching for him were disappointed, and Capernaum never grew into the great city they envisioned. But, beginning that day, in that decision, the Kingdom of God grew in power. And that same grace is offered to us, to all of Christ's Church, as we are called to rise from prayer and to move forward in service. For the Kingdom of God continues to break into our world. And all of Creation waits to see what will happen, waits to know our choice, waits for the growth of God's Kingdom in the world.

Amen.