

# *The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us”*

## **Mark 1:29-39**

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What might it look like when the kingdom of God comes near? Jesus stepped onto the scene in Galilee, proclaiming that the kingdom of God had come near. He called some fishermen to follow him. They made their way to Capernaum. On the Sabbath they attended the local synagogue. In Mark 1:21-39, we get a report from Mark about what happened that Sabbath Day. It is almost as if Mark is saying to us, if you want to see what it looks like when the kingdom of God comes near, let's use this one particular day as Exhibit A. This is a pretty good picture of what it looks like when the kingdom of God comes near, and it is all directly related to the presence of God's Beloved Son, Jesus, the one Mark has said is the long expected Messiah.

When Jesus taught in the synagogue the people were amazed at his teaching.. There was an authority in his teaching. They soon found out his authority extended beyond teaching when he drove an evil spirit out of a man. Leaving the synagogue they came to the home of Simon and Andrew, the two fishermen Jesus first called to follow. Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a fever. She was in bed, sick from the fever. Jesus went up to her, took her hand and helped her up. Her fever left her. Then, that same evening the people began to bring to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons.

If that is what a day in the life of Jesus looked like, if that day was a sample of what it looks like when the kingdom of God draws near, we can understand why Mark calls the message about Jesus, "Good news". Jesus teaches with an authority that sets his words apart from others. He demonstrates his authority in the spiritual realm as he casts an evil spirit out of a man. He heals Simon's mother-in-law and makes her well. And then when the whole town comes to the door of the house he spends half the night healing people and driving out demons. These are the things that happen when the kingdom of God draws near.

In light of that first day when so much happened that was marvelous and wonderful, I would like to point out that when the kingdom of God draws near it becomes abundantly clear God cares about our physical bodies. When the kingdom of God draws near there are signs of healing and wholeness. Our bodies are not a burden to God, something he wants to set us free from so we can live a spiritual life. God meets us right where we live, in this bag of bones that turns out to be such a mysterious miracle that God longs for us to cry out with awe, "I am

fearfully and wonderfully made.” What began that first day in the home of Simon and Andrew, with the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, surged and spread, until not just one woman was healed of a fever, but Jesus had touched the skin of the leper, the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the mouth of the mute, the legs of a paralyzed man and a hand that was withered, and on top of that he stopped the bleeding that was inside one woman and filled the stomach of thousands upon thousands whose tummies were growling with hunger. Because God cares about our bodies Jesus practiced a ministry that inside and out, from top to bottom, was concerned with every part of our physical being.

That is a nice thing, because it turns out as human beings we also care about our bodies. And when the news spread that here was a man who could restore your life and return you to normal, people came in droves. Mark wants us to know the response of people was dramatic. We are told the whole town gathered at the door that night when Jesus was in the home of Simon and Andrew, that night when Simon’s mother-in-law was healed from the fever that beset her. When people are hurting they want to find healing. It is definitely good news to us human beings that God cares about our bodies. We sure care about our bodies. We’ll line up at the door to get our turn at being healed. When something isn’t right with our bodies, we long to have a return to normal, for things to be set right, for what is broken or injured or wounded to be healed.

While it is certainly good news that God cares about our bodies, something happens in our passage this morning that cautions us against making the healing of our bodies the entirety of the good news. What happens that serves as a caution is the response of Simon’s mother-in-law. Mark has told us that when Jesus learned she was in bed with a fever he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. As he did this the fever left her. But there is a little more to the story, not much in terms of words, in fact, it is just six words. And yet the six words stand as both a caution against making the healing of our bodies the entirety of the good news and a commentary on an expanded understanding of the good news. These are the six words that are small in number but large in impact. The fever left her and...she began to wait on them.

The caution that we find in these seven words is a caution against putting our whole emphasis on the healing of the body. The body is a good thing, but it is not the only thing. Many people were healed that night. And yet we don’t know anything else about them. Could it be that when they were healed, they left that house and went back to their normal life? They were restored from whatever was ailing them. Having been restored they returned to their normal life. Not so with Simon’s mother-in-law. When the fever left her...she began to wait on them. She began to serve. For the others, it might be that once they were healed, they went back to their normal life. Things remained the way they had been. They had an

encounter with God, that was nice and the healing was wonderful, thank you God, now let me return to my normal life. For Simon's mother-in-law, the healing she experienced in her body led to a different response. She began to wait on them. We could say that the healing she experienced led to a new normal. And that is good news. With the advent of Jesus, the coming of Jesus, there is a new normal.

In a short reflection on Simon's mother-in-law, Ofelia Ortega points out that "Service is a key topic in the call and pursuit of Jesus." Service is a key topic indeed. Two of the disciples who were there that day when Simon's mother-in-law began to wait on them asked Jesus a favor...just a small favor. "When you sit in glory, (when your kingdom comes), would you let one of us sit on your left and one on the right?" (Mark 10:37) Part of what Jesus says in response to their request is that if you want to be great, you must be the servant, or the slave of all. And then he drives the point home. "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What does it look like when the kingdom of God draws near? There is a new normal. People begin to serve, rather than being served. They do that because they are following the example of Jesus, God's Beloved Son, who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom. Ofelia Ortega not only says service is a key topic, she holds up Simon's mother-in-law as a shining example of the new normal that comes with the kingdom of God. Ortega even asserts that Simon's mother-in-law is Jesus' first deacon. (Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, p. 334) What is especially important to note is that Jesus did not tell her to serve. She did it all on her own. She understood that with Jesus, there was a new normal.

This idea of a new normal that comes with Jesus, and that signals the nearness of the kingdom of God, proves to be very helpful. It is helpful in terms of God's concern for our physical bodies. Perhaps the message today about physical healing rings hollow for you. Maybe something is wrong in your life, something physical isn't normal or working right, and you have not experienced physical healing. If Simon's mother-in-law is a model for experiencing the new normal, does it mean the door is closed for you to experience the new normal that comes with Jesus if you have not been healed? Her fever left her and she got up and began to wait on them. If you have not experienced physical healing, does that mean the door is shut for you on experiencing the new normal? Do you have to experience physical healing to experience the new normal? If that is the case, many of us here will find the door is shut. Many here in this room have struggled with physical issues, to say nothing of spiritual and emotional and financial and relational issues that haven't been blessed with healing, either immediately and sometimes even long term. Does that mean we cannot experience the new normal that comes with Jesus? Does that mean we cannot experience the kingdom of God that is at hand?

I don't think that is the case. There is another time in the Gospel of Mark (14:1-11) where Jesus is in a home and he has an encounter with a woman. It is near the end of the ministry, and near the end of the life of Jesus. He has already entered Jerusalem to the hosannas of Palm Sunday. Now the Passover is just two days away. He enters a home. The home belongs to a man named Simon the Leper. As a side note, here is a hint that you do not have to be healed physically to find a new normal in Jesus. The man's name is Simon *the Leper*. Not Simon the former Leper. He is Simon the Leper...and he is there, opening his home to Jesus. I give thanks for all the ones like Simon who is still a leper, who still have chronic illness, progressive illness, physical challenges, and who move right past those challenges to come to Jesus, to welcome Jesus into their home, to welcome Jesus into their heart, and to experience the new normal there is when God's Son is present, when the kingdom of God is near. Jesus is in the home of Simon the Leper. But that is just a side note.

In the home of Simon the Leper, while Jesus was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on the head of Jesus. It is an expressive act of worship and reverence. Kings get anointed. She anoints Jesus. Jesus says it is even more than anointing him as king. She is anointing his body for burial. Remember, this is two days before the Passover. She pours her perfume as we can only assume she pours her heart and soul out to Jesus, in a generous and sacrificial act of worship and reverence. Having experienced the new normal she anoints Jesus with expensive perfume.

Notice that nothing is said about her experiencing physical healing. There is nothing in the story about an event that prompted her to respond like this. Her act of worship and service and sacrifice comes simply because Jesus is Jesus. Her new normal is to offer service and sacrifice to Jesus, even though the story says nothing, absolutely nothing, not one word, about her receiving physical healing *from* Jesus. Here in the home of Simon the Leper we find a man who still suffers from his leprosy and a woman who has no record of being healed, and yet both of them are living the new normal, where the kingdom of God is near and Jesus is worshiped with reverence and obedience.

It is good news that Jesus cares about our physical bodies. He cares so much that he heals. Not all the time. Not every person. But he heals. And he brings wholeness. He brings wholeness because he brings the kingdom of God. It is good news that Jesus cares about our physical bodies. Do we understand that he cares so much he comes right alongside us and strengthens us through our struggles, bears our burdens with us, carries our suffering in his own body. When Matthew records this same story of Simon and his mother-in-law and the crowds that come for healing, Matthew seems to imply that the healing of Jesus is not without a cost or a price. It is not a cost or price we pay.

In his account of Simon and his mother-in-law Matthew turns to the prophet Isaiah to help us understand what happens in healing. It is the passage about God's suffering servant who comes to be with us. As Matthew tells of the healings that Jesus is doing in the home of Simon and Andrew, Matthew wants us to understand that, "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases." (Isaiah 53:4, as found in the Septuagint). Could it be that the healing Jesus did included him taking those diseases and wounds and sufferings into his own body, in ways we will never fully grasp. If that is true then it is certainly not only a possibility, but a powerful reality that he is right with us in our current suffering and brokenness, lifting us, caring for us, supporting us, strengthening us, comforting us, and loving us. We are not in this alone. Jesus is with us. Jesus is with us always. Jesus is with us forever. That is our new normal. And whether we enter through the door of physical healing, or like Simon the Leper we find our new normal in and through adversity and challenges that are chronic and part of our daily existence, or even like the unnamed woman, who somehow understood that the suffering and dying that awaited Jesus would be of eternal benefit to all of us, we have before us today the possibility that we might experience a new normal.

Mark understands that the new normal is a powerful demonstration that God cares for our physical bodies. That is good news. But that is not all of the good news. So he holds up Simon's mother-in-law and those six words that ring out like a bell, announcing a new normal...she began to wait on them. The good news is that sometimes we enter the new normal through things like healing and restoration and we respond like Simon's mother-in-law. And sometimes, like Simon the Leper, ones who live with chronic and challenging diseases do not let that stop them from experiencing the new normal. Then there are those like the unnamed woman in Mark 14 who look ahead to the suffering and death of Jesus and they see that this world will never be the same. It will never be normal again. The Word of God has become flesh and he has dwelt among us. So people like this come to Jesus with the best they have, their expensive ointment, their costly sacrifice, and they anoint him...as King. Jesus is the King who loved us so much he gave his life as a ransom for us. That is the new normal. Our journey through the Gospel of Mark is an ongoing invitation to respond to that new normal.