

## SERMON- Epiphany 5 (B)

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Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Good Shepherd

February 7, 2021

Psalm 147:1-12, 21e

*I speak to you in the NAME of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN*

### OPENING:

“We have to be concerned about the mutants.”<sup>1</sup> ..... “Mutants”

“We are at war with the virus.” ..... “War”

Where do you think those statements came from:

from the Gospel of Mark, talking about Jesus and the demons?

OR from a news conference this week with Dr. Fauci and others?

“Mutants” ... “War.” The language is pulpy and sensational.

It fits Mark’s Gospel which is sometimes compared to a Comic Book with Jesus as its Superhero, combatting evil in a supernatural way.

In modern times, though, talk of “mutants” and “war” with medical diseases seems kind of fantastical and overwrought. But I indeed heard those statements on Tuesday flipping through the cable news networks. I was taken back at the words our modern scientists and leaders were using to try to explain our current reality.

The Gospel of Mark is known for the directness of its language, its bold and frank tone catches your ear.

It’s been said that if Matthew and Luke are our Beethoven and Bach, that means that Mark is our..... Hank Williams, Sr.

I chose Hank Sr. because Richard (and friends) are going to play some of his songs later in our service and because the Gospel of Mark is, at its essence, just “three chords and the truth.”

That our leaders are using language similar to Mark’s is actually really helpful.

It shows that the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century is maybe not so far away, shows that *their* considerations of illness and sickness and pain and death are, actually, oh so close to ours.

Maybe, this time, we can look at Jesus’ actions as told by Mark, and get closer to that world and, indeed, closer to Jesus’ healing touch.

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<sup>1</sup> “White House COVID-19 Response Team Briefing” C-SPAN. (February 3, 2021).  
[White House COVID-19 Response Team Briefing | C-SPAN.org \(c-span.org\)](https://www.c-span.org/White-House-COVID-19-Response-Team-Briefing)

## MIRACLES

Usually, usually, scenes like the ones described in our Gospel just seem so distant. Our understanding of medicine and science make us suspicious of those types of stories. So we ask:

Just *how did* Jesus heal those people?

*What* were they sick with?

What do those *demons* really ‘represent’?

These questions come out of our modern worldview. They would NOT have been on the minds of Mark’s readers, at least in the same way.

At that time, evil spirits/ demons/ etc. were understood just as a part of that world that people had to contend with them. Healers and sages, like Jesus, then possessed the power to drive them out and heal.

So it’s mistake to inject our rational explanations that depend on medical anthropology and require natural law into the scene.<sup>2</sup>

## MEANING:

Instead, here’s another way of thinking about it; these healing stories in Mark’s Gospel had many purposes:

to explain who God is, to explain who Jesus was,  
to explain how to interpret Scripture,  
to explain discipleship, and more.

Not on that list of purposes is the stories being a way to explain how the world works in a mechanistic, rationalist way.

We can say they are wrong, that they are misinformed, they are backwards, primitive etc. for believing what they did.

But all we gain is an inflated ego that (would you not agree?) is destined to be popped. And, again, it’s not really the focus of the story.

The question, for us, should not be “Did the miracles happen?” It should be instead: “What do they mean?”<sup>3</sup>

“What does health/ sickness/ illness/wholeness mean then?”

“What do they mean now?”

So, for us then, the question can be asked:

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, Ched. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark’s Study of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 143; Culpepper, Alan R. 2007. *Mark*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 67-68.

<sup>3</sup> Culpepper, 68.

“What does COVID mean?”

That’s a much scarier question than “did the miracles happen?”, if you really ask it and think about it.

But in asking it, we do the work to bridge the gap between these 2000 years, because we are all, at least, asking the same question.

What does this illness mean? What does a cure mean? What does healing mean?

## **HEALTHCARE:**

To do so, let’s take a quick look at the healthcare system in 1<sup>st</sup> century rural Palestine, where Jesus lived and breathed and taught and healed.

Scholars note that “Jesus and all healers of that period could only perceive illness and not diseases... (in fact) There was an almost total disregard for symptoms (something very essential to disease). Instead there is a constant concern for meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, our biomedical approach places primary emphasis on symptoms and pathogens where disease affects individuals, and so individuals are treated. That’s what we are used to, generally.

The healthcare system of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, meanwhile, places its primary emphasis on the culturally construed causes of illness. Illness is understood as affecting the community, it’s a reality of the community, faced by the community, where the illness was also associated with impurity or sin, and meant exclusion from the community in some way.

Do not see my comparison between 1<sup>st</sup> century ethnomedicine of rural Palestine and 21<sup>st</sup> century biomedicine as saying we should not listen to our scientists.

It’s just a different understanding of health and sickness.

Now, by some miracle (there’s that word again!) of Fairfax County bureaucracy, I got my first vaccine shot yesterday.

It came out of the blue, and I certainly did not hesitate to trust our modern science, and jumped at the opportunity.

But still, I still think it’s important to consider the world that Jesus lived in, the world that Mark wrote his Gospel in, and how it can help us with the demons and nightmares of today.

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<sup>4</sup> Pilch, John J. "Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. 15.4 (1985): 142, 149.

## QUESTION

So, again, what is the meaning behind it all?

I can't pretend to really know what COVID means, I do know that when I got the email from Fairfax County about the vaccine, I was standing right where I am now, practicing an early version of this sermon. I was conscious that I did not really deserve it. My parents had not received theirs yet, so many of you that I have talked to have not.

Why was I, as a clergy-person, given a bump in the line? When other have not? I know, intellectually, that they have said: when you are given the opportunity to take it. That it now allows me to be closer to others, to help others.

But it still does not seem right.

Whenever you are in a quandary on sermon, one is taught to always return to the text, to the Scripture. I will do that but instead to the two statements that I began my sermon with. The ones talking about "Mutants" and "War"

That's symbolic language that should make us think about our world on a deeper level. They are trying to summon a narrative that is larger than ourselves. As Christians, we know that God's story and plan are larger still, and that the miracles represent that there was hope for those in rural Palestine, even against all odds, just as there is hope for us now.<sup>5</sup> The hope lies in God and in each other.

Both statements also began with: "We."

That "We" is reminder that we are a community, that what your community around you does is important. It's always been important but it has new meaning now. We can't hope to survive living lives that are so displaced from one another. We are in this together, we have to find its meaning in some way together, in some sense collectively.

And we are struggling to do that. It seems like we need a miracle, but luckily we don't need to perform that miracle, we need community. We don't need to create miracles, we need to consider a world larger than ourselves.

"We feel so powerless to make a difference, (to perform a miracle) to transform a life, to heal a wound. We feel powerless because generally we are powerless. (Luckily), our role is simply to bring people into proximity with Jesus, to invite them into his presence and to trust and pray that his transforming love and power will make the difference."<sup>6</sup>

**AMEN**

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<sup>5</sup> Myers, 143-144.

<sup>6</sup> "Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Gospel (Mark 1.24-29)* 40.