

“Jesus’s Job Description”

Isaiah 40: 21-31, Mark 1: 29-39 – Rev. Rachel Cooley Shawler Vista La Mesa Christian Church
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And now will you pray with me and for me as I ask that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart will be faithful and pleasing to the Living God. Amen.

Last week, I said I was grateful for our ancestors in the church for forming the Revised Common Lectionary, and this week I’m thankful to them for forming & printing the Chalice Hymnal with all the many hymns & resources it includes. How amazing that we get to follow in the faith so many who have creatively expressed about their sense of the holy. Thanks be to God.

I’ve read the beginning of our passage from Mark countless times. That’s because it’s in the Catholic book for laypeople, in a liturgy to pray for the sick. In hospital rooms all over UCSD hospitals for me, and indeed all over the world for many others, this passage of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, her fever, Jesus’s healing touch, and her response is read. If you’ve ever been in a hospital room, you surely know the back and forth from trust that God will heal to desperate questions of why this suffering came in the first place, and where God is, all in fervent prayer & conversation with God. I feel that back and forth of faith and doubt in our scriptures today. The “have you not heard, have you not known?” in Isaiah can feel like a reprimand from a Sunday school teacher, causing us students to keep

our questions about suffering inside. But that doesn't make them go away. I can almost hear Simon Peter's internal laments as he leads the search party to "hunt" for Jesus. "Everyone is searching for you," they say. "Come heal more people, there are so many. So, so many. How are there so many?! How many can you heal?... Is this how we are to become fishers of men?"

All the Disciples have seen so far in the Gospel of Mark is a preview for the Movie of Jesus. These first chapters of Mark move so quickly, the author's favorite phrase seems to be "and immediately," on to the next thing, drawing us in with wonder. We are introduced to Jesus's temptation in the desert in only about 40 words, and told little about these healings and why the first disciples drop their nets to follow him. Surely, we are intrigued. Who is this person Jesus? What is he here to do? The demons recognize him, he "would not permit them to speak because they know him," but we do not yet. Is he the Messiah?! And what is the Messiah's job description?

Peter can barely wrap his head around these questions, so caught up with all the suffering he's witnessing, it seems. Perhaps Jesus knows Peter is having a moment, he needs a moment. When do we get caught up in overwhelm about all the suffering? It can happen so quickly, so often these days, it seems. Are "these days" worse than other days, historical time periods, or are we just choked up, frozen? And who could blame us, with the 24 hour news cycle & doom scrolling social media & cell phone footage of violence & harm? We see it all, one horror on top of the other, as Peter & the disciples do in this moment, when all the ill & struggling

people throughout the area are being brought to Jesus, quite possibly to the doorstep of Peter's family home, where Jesus visited.

Perhaps Jesus even feels overwhelmed by all the suffering. Perhaps he has to drag himself away, early in the morning, "while it was still dark," which is a loaded phrase in Mark's gospel. We'll read it again when religious leaders hand Jesus over to Pilate, and when the women come to the tomb where Jesus has been buried. He retreats to a place which is "deserted," the same word which describes where John the Baptist lived and where Jesus walked the desert & was tempted. This prayer time may well be a time of Jesus's own searching, wondering at suffering, struggling to maintain a cool head. When Mark describes the crowds following him, I can't help but imagine what I would feel like, being pressed upon by so many. Surely his body buzzes with anxiety, and there are moments where fight or flight kicks in, draining blood from his brain and into his body, to prepare as if for danger. Or maybe he'd want to freeze, as we so often do when we feel pressure mounting. When I consider this, it's no wonder Jesus had to peel himself away sometimes, to come back to himself, to ground his body, to collect his thoughts and then voice them to God. "What am I meant to do," he might pray, "what is my job description when there are so many who want healing? When my disciples suggest I could bureaucratize my healing powers, staying in one home or one synagogue and having folks make appointments to see me & receive my touch? Why travel about, or preach at all?" Of course, we can't be sure what he may have asked God, and we may all wonder or conclude different

things, thanks be to God. Mark leaves us wondering here, urging us to keep reading & keep filling in the blanks he leaves with our own wonder at the mystery of Jesus and his call.

Whatever happened that “dark” and “deserted” morning in prayer, Jesus emerges from it saying, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” Perhaps he is recentered in his job description, though Peter and the disciples will try to sway him about it again and again as the movie continues. Back to Jesus’s initial proclamation of his public ministry, in verse 15 a few paragraphs before our reading: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” If “you have not heard,” as Isaiah says, Jesus will proclaim it to you, that you might “repent” which means “turn around” from your normal ways, make a u-turn. When you get overwhelmed about suffering, which is so real, take your moment to pause & turn back toward God, who “brings princes to naught,” blowing away human kingdoms to co-create a new kingdom of love & mercy. God calls all things in this kingdom by name, Isaiah reminds us. God does not faint or grow weary in the face of many in pain, but gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Remember, Isaiah implores: we humans may become tired and depressed—“even the youth will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted”—but “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.”

Jesus can know & trust that God will be there with the suffering because God numbers & names all things. God gives presence & love to

Jesus when Jesus turns to him, just as God will give presence & love to each of us when we repent or turn back to God, and trust that God can hold all the laments & questions & hopes we name. Trust that God already knows the suffering we name, and is already working to alleviate it. Jesus is one who works to alleviate it in the world, but he is not the only one, of the countless creatures God knows. Like Simon Peter's mother-in-law: sadly here unnamed for us by the author, as are so many women in the bible. She is not just serving a gender stereotypical part, though it can sound like she just lives to wait on the visiting men, as hostess. Jesus, James, & John have entered Peter's house, and they tell Jesus about her fever "at once." Jesus goes to her, takes her hand, and raises her up. Her fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them, becoming the first deacon, in the kingdom of God breaking in right then & there. Her response to healing is to serve, to become a healer for them, perhaps bringing a meal so they might rest & recuperate. She understands her job description in the kingdom, in response to the loving touch she has received from Jesus.

Her son-in-law, Simon Peter, on the other hand, goes to hunt Jesus down when there are others to be served. He doesn't serve them himself. She gets the call to discipleship is to serve, he doesn't, yet, in this preview. So it's on Jesus to go to God, re-center in the Good News that he is not the only one who has to heal all who suffer, but that the kingdom of God breaks in when we all serve one another. Our job description is to spread this Good News, not just in one home or synagogue, as Jesus denies settling down & institutionalizing, but throughout our world, as Jesus goes

throughout Galilee. I imagine our first deaconess--who I so wish was named--preached and taught in her home & her community, as she served & shared. Who else will get involved & begin to heal & testify, Mark begs us to ask? Of all those strengthened by God, who “will run and not be weary, who will walk and not faint.” What pauses do we need to return to God, such that we will not fall exhausted? What service do we need from our siblings in Christ to encourage & sustain us? How do we stay centered in our job description?

May we make the u-turns & open ourselves to serving & being served. For this sharing here & now as we trust the presence of God all around creation, with so many like us, is the Good News. Amen.