

Mark 1 - Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

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

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "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." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

²²It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

²³who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

²⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

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Mark 1:29-39

“Fever”

Kerra Becker English

During my seminary internship in Texas, a dear parishioner named Suzy who helped me navigate that year gave me a little prayer book called, “The Prayer Tree.” (Michael Leunig) It’s not a particularly deep or theological book, but there is a prayer in it that I tend to remember or at least consult with every single cold and flu season.

Here’s how it goes:

God bless those who suffer from the common cold.

Nature has entered into them;

Has laid them aside and gently laid them low

To contemplate life from the wayside;

To consider human frailty;

To receive the deep and dreamy messages of fever.

We give thanks for the insight of this humble perspective.

We give thanks for blessings in disguise.

This flu season has been particularly rough in our state, as well as in several others. Sabrina Squire, local news personality for NBC 12, recently updated her Facebook page with

thankfulness for those at her job and in her family who looked out for her while she had quite a severe case of it. Busy people like Pat and Delores had to change their plans because of the multiple days it takes to feel decent again. Some schools have closed to get the spread of it under control, and our local hospitals are creating policies right now around visitation to limit the spread of this particular epidemic. I must say, it rearranged my week too when I “got the call” on the way to my Tuesday lunch meeting to pick up Ryleigh from school with all the tell-tale signs that she was coming down with it. The flu is no joke, but for otherwise fairly healthy people, it runs its course, and life gets back to normal in a reasonable amount of time.

Nevertheless, it’s the kind of thing you really don’t want to give thanks for – because you already feel lousy, or find yourself taking care of someone else’s grossness. It messes with your plans. And it reminds you, without even having to say it, that you are human, vulnerable, mortal, and frail. If these viruses – smaller than our eyes can see can do this to us – how do we dare to think that we have control in the rest of our lives?

That’s the beauty of a cold, the silver lining of a sinus infection, the backwards blessing of getting the flu, it stops you from thinking you have everything all under control. It makes you remember that you live, every day, in a body. It reminds you that meetings can be canceled, chores can go undone, and you can stay in bed all day long for a very good reason – so that your body can rest and begin to heal. And if you’re caring for someone else, it reminds you that sometimes getting your child a cold washcloth or your spouse a glass of water, or taking chicken soup to a friend can be more important than going to the meeting that had been on your calendar for a month.

Now these aren’t the big illnesses I’m talking about here, the ones where you have to ask your doctor twice if you heard correctly what he or she just said. These are the minor illnesses,

the inconveniences, the blips that change our daily perspective but not necessarily the whole picture. They do have the potential for being blessings in disguise to give us the rest we wouldn't otherwise give ourselves. I have found it interesting that busy Americans report that they sometimes secretly hope for a short-range sickness like this because they can't seem to give themselves real rest without a specific reason to do so. That's sad. We shouldn't feel so guilty about caring for our bodies that it takes a cold or the flu for us to start to pay attention. God created us as embodied human beings. As I heard in Sunday School last week, we are souls wrapped up in these bodies. And yet, our bodies are very much a part of who we are and our souls on this earth don't mean much without them.

It's telling that Jesus spent a great deal of his ministry healing bodies. He brought wholeness of mind, and body, and spirit to the places where he traveled, and people sought him out as not only a religious teacher, but as a healer. This early story in Mark's gospel tells us about Jesus and his healing ministry – and starts it off with something rather simple. Simon's mother-in-law has a fever. That's all we know – but maybe it's enough. She has a cold, a virus, an infection of some sort. She's resting, in bed, doing what we all do when we feel feverish, lying down, and not doing very much.

What happens next – I'm not sure if I like it or not. Jesus hears about her fever and goes in to her. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up, and the fever leaves her immediately. I'm OK with that, but then it says, "And she began to serve them." What's up Jesus? Did you heal her so that she could get dinner started? Was her sickness an inconvenience to Simon and his friends stopping by? Maybe you hear that differently. I hope that you do. I hope you hear Jesus' kindness, and his desire to make his friend's mother-in-law well. But I can't help but hear it in my own idiom of being at times the care-taker, the snack-maker, or the host of the household.

Was Jesus really doing her a favor? I have my suspicions. Especially since I return so often to this prayer of blessing for the perspective of getting a cold every now and then. The “deep and dreamy” messages of fever are meaningful times of contemplation. Taking time to consider my own frailty is a decent spiritual discipline. Getting up out of my sick-bed to immediately tend to a handful of unexpected visitors – not so much.

But Jesus doesn't stop there, that's the good news. He goes on to heal a whole city full of sick and demon-possessed people. They hear about his power and his kindness and want to be restored. That's good news for us that Jesus doesn't want us to remain in the sick and dependent state. He wants us made well again. And then to be good to himself, in the morning, he walks away from everyone to a place where he won't be easily found, and he spends time praying. Jesus also is a care-taker, a snack-maker, the host and teacher who seems to be tireless, and nevertheless finds his own ways to get rest.

Healing and rest, rest and healing go together. Yes, now we also have Tamiflu. But what I grew up with for taking care of colds and flu still works magic in the healing process. Rest. Let someone care for you. Don't try to go to the meeting, or teach the class, or do the laundry. Pile on the blankets, snuggle with the dog, or bring on the cold washcloth. Drink liquids when you are able. Rest, and be renewed. It may not be the instantaneous healing that Mark describes, where someone takes our hand, lifts us out of bed, and the fever drains out of us. In fact, that may not even be what we want from Jesus in that moment. Maybe we just want him to hold our hand in that dream-like fever state so we know it's going to be OK.

God bless those who suffer from the common cold or the fatigue of flu.

Nature has entered into them;

Has laid them aside and gently laid them low

To contemplate life from the wayside;

To consider human frailty;

To receive the deep and dreamy messages of fever.

We give thanks for the insight of this humble perspective.

We give thanks for blessings in disguise.

Remember if you can, to give thanks for the blessings in disguise, the moments that take us out of our usual perspective and grant us the time and space to consider our own frailty, our own complexity, our own humanity. May you be touched by nature and humbled by your own bodily existence. You are a miracle. Life is a miracle. Getting sick and then becoming well give us practice in the art of contemplation from the wayside. Amen.