

“Lifted Up”

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Rev. Greg Jarrell

Co-Pastor of SouthPark Christian Church

February 26, 2012

Today we join with Christians around the globe in celebrating the first Sunday of Lent. We are learning during this season to mark our days with penitence, with denial of self for the purpose of the glory of God. The observance of Lent is not simply an inward journey toward seeing the brokenness in our selves, though it is that. It is also an opportunity to learn to see the brokenness of the world we inhabit, to name that brokenness, and to remember that God’s creation was made not for brokenness but for wholeness. The observance of Lent is going to require of us naming the broken places in the world and moving towards them. We acknowledge that we are dust, and we remember that God made each and every one of God’s creatures from dust into a beautiful creation. Being sorry for the sorry state of the world is not enough – conversion requires our actions moving our little corners of the world toward wholeness. So we being, at the beginning of Lent, near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of Mark.

Jim and Carol

It was a cold Friday afternoon in Boone, in the early part of March. In keeping with the local religious observances, the ACC Tournament created the backdrop on the radio as Jim and Mark made a quick trek across town. Father and son were close, one a student at Appalachian State, the other a minister to students. Boone is not very big, so a couple of minutes in the car and the drop off was done. Mark got into his own car – “Bye, Dad” – and pulled away. Jim had no way to know that this was the last time either he or his wife Carol would see Mark.

That dreadful call came next. There was a fire, and their only child Mark was gone. A gaping, bottomless hole of grief followed.

I do not know the wound that the death of a child causes. I feel confident to say it never fully heals. I do know that woundedness does not preclude the ability to practice the art of healing.

If any people I know have ever been a practitioners of that art, they are Jim and Carol Fisher. Out of their woundedness has grown the deepest compassion I know, the most refined ability to listen to God and others. Where a deep wound of grief was, a bubbling spring of quiet joy now rises up. I have been a recipient of God’s healing through these beloved saints. I know of dozens of others who would testify to the same thing, because a couple of ordinary folks received extraordinary grace and would not think of holding it for themselves.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus has pretty much set Capernaum on its ear with his first public act, and the crowds are quickly mounting. In fact, for the evening of the healings he is performing in today’s passage, the whole city has gathered around the door to bear witness to this remarkable thing that is going on. They press in on him, and he must escape eventually, to a deserted place. That’s another sermon for another day. But today, I want us to turn our attention to the first part of the story.

We should mention that there is a feminist critique that must be brought to bear on this story. I hope that we're sensitive enough readers that we find part of the action of the story somewhat offensive to our ears: "The fever left her, and she began to serve them." *Hey Ma, you're feeling better now? Good. Back to the kitchen! These guys are hungry. Oh yeah, I need you to make sure I have a clean tunic for work tomorrow as well.* I won't blame any of the saints here if, when you don your starry crown and your white robe, you don't proceed to take Simon and Andrew to task for letting such an event take place. I'll be in line right behind you.

I also hope that we're deep enough readers not to stop with that interpretation. In fact I think that the little clause "she began to serve them" is the key for us today. Here's why: Simon and Andrew's mother-in-law was sick. This was not just any fever, not a "take two of these and call me in the morning" fever. This was a sick to the death fever. A bed-becomes-cooling-board, bedclothes-become-your-winding-sheet fever. But then, Jesus shows up. I don't know if you've heard, but Jesus has a knack for just showing up at the right places, at the right time. And when he shows up, the passage says he takes her by the hand and lifts her up. He lifts her up. She prefigures Jesus, who is soon going to be lifted up as well. He lifts this woman up and heals her, and she becomes a sign and a symbol of Jesus. This sickness is not unto death, her life testifies, because there is one who heals. There is one who kneels down to the beds of the sick and raises them up. And part of the Good News is that this is just the beginning. You think healing a woman of a fever is impressive? Well, it is, but this is only chapter one. Just wait 'til you see what's coming! The one who lifts up will himself be lifted up, but in an even greater way than this.

At this point in the story, having been lifted up, the mother-in-law becomes one of the heroes of the story. We don't know this lady's name, but she is our teacher this morning, because she wastes no time. She is healed, and she begins to serve. She knows that if you've been healed, you ought to be healing somebody else. If you've been delivered, you ought to be delivering a captive yourself. If you've been set free, you better be breaking some chains and teaching somebody else to soar like an eagle, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint. This blessed woman is one of the first to teach us the upside-down algebra of Jesus: that the one who is lifted up will be brought low, and the one who is brought low will be lifted up.

She's been lifted up, and she shows us our future. You want to be healed? Then you're going to have to step down low. You're going to have to get your hands dirty now, not just lay there feeling sorry for yourself that you were ever sick in the first place. There are going to be heartbroken people that need you now. There are hungry folks that aren't going to eat unless you feed them. There are going to be smelly ones that will want to hug you. There are going to be friends and neighbors sitting right next to you in the pew, walking right by you after service who are dying inside if you'll take a second to notice. And if you've been healed, if you've been lifted up, then you can begin to serve them.

And once you've been healed, you don't do it so that your name will be known. You don't serve for recognition, to be called out in front of others. You don't chase headlines. Let Simon and Andrew, James and John have them. You serve because somebody served you. Let the crowds gather where they will. Let the attention follow someone else. Let the history books remember somebody else's name. You serve because when Jesus lifts you up, that's what you do.

Jesus himself had no issues with doing this himself, either. In one of our most beloved, yet difficult stories, we find him about to be lifted up on a cross, about to be denied and betrayed

by his closest friends. And still, he brings himself low. Taking a towel and a basin, he performs the work of a servant, a slave. He bends low. He disregards the squeamishness. He ignores the disciples' protests. He becomes intimate with dust. He makes known to all those who will follow him, every saint in every generation, that the one who is healed must become the healer. The one who is lifted up must be brought low. The one who will wear the white robe and the starry crown will bear scars and stains, hunched back and tired knees. They will serve anyway. Brothers and sisters, go and do likewise.