

The Word at Work!

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Steven D. Spencer – Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church

Mark 1:29–39

And immediately Jesus left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed 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. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and from our Lord who is the Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Last week we saw Jesus go immediately into the synagogue at Capernaum to teach. And He taught with so much authority afterwards He cast a demon out of a man. This week we see Jesus immediately entering the house of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. With them also are James and John. Those present informed Jesus that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. She was bedridden according to Greek text. She wasn't getting up anytime soon. This was a serious illness. The Gospel of St. Luke said she had a high fever, not just one of those low-grade annoying fevers that seem to hang on forever. This was a high fever, a serious illness and the Gospel of Luke says Jesus rebuked the fever to restore her health.

I love the way Jesus works. Here, in this little house, Jesus is completely there for this woman burning up with fever. He comes to her bedside, bends down, takes her by the hand and lifts her up. At that very moment, it's as though there was no one else in the world but this woman. And there is no doubt as to why Jesus is there. He is there for her.

As He lifts her up by the hand the fever leaves her. He sure makes it look easy, doesn't He? Simply a touch and the fever is gone. And to make things even more unremarkable, she gets up from her sickbed and begins to serve them. Put on some coffee, prepare a meal, makes them comfortable, remarkable. It's a great example of Jesus love and mercy, but hardly enough to make the headlines.

As miracles go, this is sort of underwhelming. Really, almost not even worth reporting. More intriguing is finding out that Peter is married and that he has a mother-in-law living with him. People recover from fevers all the time. So often I've been notified of someone having an extremely high temperature in the morning and fully expecting to be making a hospital visit before day's end. But just a few short hours later another call saying all is well, the fever's gone. Do we call that a miracle? Usually not!

But the text would have us rethink and repent. We're caught in our own little version of what is called materialistic naturalism – the notion that natural events always have a natural cause. It's a basic theory in the study of natural sciences today. It's one way to keep the idea of a Creator out of the creation and out of the curriculum. Nature is natural, and therefore nature must have a natural cause. Of course, it doesn't really explain how everything could start out from nothing, but then, that's about as far as you can go if you want to purposely leave God out of the picture.

Now that being said, it may be a little bit over your head or off your radar screen or way out in left field which are nice ways of saying, "So what, Pastor?" Unless you're arguing with a Darwinist or someone at local school board over the science curriculum, it may not mean all that much and you may not even care all that much. But when it comes to the sneezes and sniffles, the colds and flu's, and possibly for some sinister illness like cancers and clogged arteries, we're all pretty much materialistic naturalists. We've been trained by science

and medicine to see natural causes as the ultimate cause, the final word on health and healing. If the fever breaks, the flu goes away and we regain our strength to serve, then it was the pills we took or our immune system kicked in or the vitamin B shot the doc gave or whatever. Now, I'm not saying don't go to the doctor, don't take your prescriptions, don't watch your diet and exercise. These are all gifts of God – the doctors, the medicines, the tests, and treatment. But these are instruments, tools in the toolbox of the Great Physician in whom there is life and health. The healing may come through medicines, or even the natural healing processes of our wonderfully designed bodies, but all healing, regardless of what means and methods, come from Jesus, the Incarnate Word through whom we were all made and in whom there is life.

By the way notice that it's all the same to Jesus, whether a case of fever or a case of demon possession. He treats them all the same – with His touch and with His Word. Every spiritual illness, whether demons or diseases, the life threatening or the simply the annoying, is a sign of the Fall, the disorder of God's ordered creation, the groanings of a world subject to futility, decay and death. Every illness, including those little colds and flu's, are signs of our own death, mirrors of our mortality reflecting that harsh reality that we are natural born children of Adam subject to Adam's death. Every healing, including the little ones when the fever breaks at the end of the day, are little resurrections, small reminders that the One who suffered for our sins on the cross who is our health and strength. For ***“By His wounds (T) we are healed.”***

What Jesus did for the gathered many outside the house of Peter's mother-in-law, He does for this poor, fever-stricken woman with His own personal touch. Jesus could have wiped out every disease in the world in one blast of His Word, one divine flu shot to cover the whole world. But that isn't His way. Instead, He bends down and touches this woman in her own home. And then He spends the greater part of the afternoon and evening doing the same for others.

He draws all to Himself by being lifted up on the cross, embracing and embodying the whole world. He is God's love to the world. And yet He applies this gift personally and individually, one person at a time. To each one in Baptism, as the water is poured on you, in the Absolution, as hands are touched to your head and words of life and forgiveness are put into your ears. In the Supper, where you receive with your mouths the gifts of His sacrifice, His own Body and Blood, touching you, taking you by the hand, lifting you up from the fever of your sin and death, raising you to a life of grateful service. All of it “for you,” as personally as the “for you” Jesus spoke to Peter's mother-in-law.

Early in the morning, before sunrise, Jesus arose and went off by Himself to pray. You would think that He would ride this celebrity wave. The crowds were great, the word was out, the opportunity was present. But Jesus goes off by Himself to pray. The disciples go looking for Jesus and tell Him what He already knows: ***“Everyone is looking for you.”*** What was His response? ***“Let us go on to the next towns, so that I may preach there also, for that is why I came.”***

He didn't come to put a temporary bandage on our wounds. You know what happens to bandages; they fall off or get washed away. Jesus came to heal our wounds completely, once and for all. He came to preach, to proclaim the kingdom, to suffer, to die, and to rise and so to deal entirely with the cause of our disease and death.

The fact is Peter's mother-in-law would get sick again. There would be other colds and flu's and fevers. One day, she would die from one of them. The medical report and her obituary would read that she “died of natural causes.” Again, that our materialistic naturalism. Death by natural causes, as if death were nothing more than the expected natural order of things.

The ultimate cause of death is anything but natural. It is the unnatural wages of our sin, the anarchy of our rebellion, the chaos of our humanity living in denial of God and making ourselves out to be gods instead. All those diseased and demonized people whom Jesus healed would one day die of something. But they would know, just as Peter's mother-in-law would know, in whom to trust on that day – the One who touched them

with His gentle healing touch, who silenced their demons with a comforting Word, who hung on a cross in the darkness, who rose from the dead in the early morning. They would know even though they die, yet in Jesus they would live, and living and trusting Jesus, they shall never die again

There was an interesting change made in the post-communion blessing with the new hymnal. You probably haven't noticed it. "The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting. I typically say it the old way, "in the true faith," but I really ought to say "in body and soul." While I really appreciate the old and its emphasis on right believing, the new is a reminder that Jesus came to deal with our death and to conquer it and reminds us, that which is good for our souls is also good for our bodies. Jesus is the ultimate Source and Cause of our own health and strength. For there is a Day coming when we will finally realize and receive this in our own bodies, when Jesus bends down and takes us by the hand, and takes us from death to life everlasting just as He once raised Peter's mother-in-law from her sickness to health.

You too, dear redeemed believers have been touched by God's strong word and by His healing touch. The Word in the water of your Baptism, the Word preached into your ears. The Word in the bread and wine you receive in His Holy Supper, what the ancient church called the "medicine of immortality." To you He has given His Word, you are His child, and all your sins are forgiven. Heaven is yours. The prophet Isaiah says it this way:

"Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait on 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 grow faint." You have His Word on it, in Jesus name, Amen and Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!