

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 8, 2009  
Mark 1:29-39

My sister once said that she likes nothing better than a good flu – something that overcomes the hurried pace of life, slows her down, and lets her stay in bed all day and eat comfort food. She's obviously referring to a respiratory flu. She couldn't possibly say the same about a stomach bug, which it seems so many around here have these days. And she couldn't possibly have many in the world who agree with her.

For one, I'm sure Simon Peter's mother-in-law wouldn't agree with my sister. I can imagine her bedridden for days, sweating and shivering, too weak to get cleaned up, too weak to eat.

You know how sometimes you have so many aches and pain that even your eyelids hurt, your scalp is sensitive to the touch? I think this is how Simon's mother in law must have felt: exhausted and weak, vulnerable, fragile and hurting.

So, when I read the first lines of the Gospel story we just heard I am relieved for Simon's mother-in-law. I am grateful for Jesus' intervention. And I am touched by its intimacy.

Jesus came to a sick and fragile woman, bedridden with a fever, and reached for her hand. Holding her by the hand, he raised her. The verb the writer uses - *egeiro* - is the same word used at the end of the gospel of Mark. There, when the women go to Jesus' tomb to anoint him, they find only a man dressed in white. He says to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here."

He raised her. He has been raised.

The paschal reference in today's passage should not be lost on the hearer of the Gospel. This is an Easter story. We do not know how sick the mother-in-law was, but we know she was in bad shape. With the paschal reference we can infer that her immediate healing represents a transformation. She is no longer the same person who fell sick with a fever. She will never be that person again. She, a woman in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine - lowly in stature, has encountered God. God has, in fact, come to her - personally.

How amazing (!) and how can this be so?

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

I read the Gospel story, I think about the nature of God – especially as described in Isaiah - wholly other and yet always reaching for our hand, and I want to remain here – meditating on the healing of the mother-in-law.

I wish I could just enter into this story of transformation. But, to be honest, I find it difficult to do so – at least at first. For the very next sentence irritates my modern sensibilities.

The story continues, "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

Oh c'mon Mark!

Here we go again:

A woman's place is in the kitchen. The woman's job is to serve the men.  
The man does the important talking. The woman clears the table.

Four men enter a house.

The woman is sick.

There is no one to fire up the oven.

No one to get the olives.

No one to pour the wine.

"Simon, where is your mother in law?"

"Ahh, she's sick in bed. This darn fever has really worn her out."

"Well, someone has got to do something. It's dinnertime!"

"Yeah, it's been a long day and I am hungry"

"What are we going to do?"

"Hey, someone should tell Jesus. He'll know what to do! And I bet he's hungry too – all that teaching and casting out unclean spirits will really increase a man's appetite!"

Perhaps - *perhaps* - I am being a little too liberal with my imagination. Certainly, this conversation didn't come to me in a revelation. I made it up as I tried to work out why I reacted so strongly to this text:

"[Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

All of us bring who we are to the reading of Scripture. We read the word of God and we react.

Sometimes, though, we let the Word read us.

The conversation we have with Scripture is a living conversation. Our encounter with the living Word is a two-way street. We encounter Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, in the Scriptures and at the same time the eternal Word reaches out to us - takes our hand and lifts us up!

So, get out those Bibles and let the Word read you! (You may be surprised by what you find out about God through such a discipline).

Whenever I read a passage from scripture and react somewhat sarcastically – which I did when first reading this passage - I know I have found a place I need to stop and enter into more prayerfully.

I know I am not living in first century Palestine as Simon's mother-in-law was. I live in a very different context 2000 years later, a college-educated successful woman in her early thirties, who has been gainfully employed outside the house for over a decade.

I recognize the difference in circumstances, honor that, and then return to the passage to find the truth I, as a follower of Christ, need to hear.

And I find that truth, and like Paul in today's second reading from Corinthians, I feel compelled to proclaim it!

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

We all search for God in different places. We all experience God in different ways. We all have come here this morning for different reasons. But I bet most of you have come here to encounter a living, passionate God. A God who has the power to heal and to raise up, to transform us and give us new life.

But for what?

- That is the question.

The entire liturgy, the beautiful music we are blessed to hear this morning, the light that blesses us as it shines through these windows, the hearing of the Word, the reaching out to take a friend's hand as we pass the peace, the sharing in Christ's Body and Blood – all of this moves us to encounter God, and to be renewed.

But for what?

- That is the question.

During its annual retreat, our vestry spent hours yesterday thinking about the ways the church helps renew the faithful, while also preparing the faithful to pass through those doors into our broken world.

We meet God. We experience God's presence and action in our lives. We are renewed.

But for what?

This question is answered in today's Gospel: "Then the fever left her, and she began to *serve* them."

What appears at first glance to be yet another example of "Dag, the Bible can really do a woman wrong" turns into a beautiful story of how a woman becomes the very first example of a deacon - of one who serves.

The mother-in-law in this story represents the first example of the self emptying humility necessary for following Christ.

Certainly, we have been introduced to several men who leave all to follow Christ and become his disciples. These are faithful men. Yet, the true nature of discipleship is lost on them for much of the Gospel account.

It isn't until Chapter 10 that these men see what being a true disciple is – and they only see after Jesus makes it explicit for them.

As he foretells his death and resurrection for the third time, we hear Jesus say, "But whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Simon's mother-in-law gets this right away! Through her encounter with God – through Christ's healing touch - she is transformed.

She is not passive in her role as servant, but active. SHE takes the initiative to serve Jesus and the other men. And really she can do no other.

Similarly, when we encounter God – whether in liturgy, nature, in other people – we have a responsibility to respond. To serve not only God, but each other. To serve with an open and humble heart.

This responsibility is not a burden but a joy.

In serving others we grow deeper into relationship with the one who emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death, even to a humiliating death on a cross.

Christ takes our hand and lifts us up.

Today, how are we going to respond?

Amen.