

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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February 4, 2024

This is the Year of Mark. And something you gotta know about Mark is that he loves the word “immediately.” It’s a little hard to tell that sometimes in English, because translators have taken that word out in some places to make the text sound better to our modern ears, but if you were to read Mark in Greek, it’s just like a rapid-fire, go-go-go-go kinda story. Something is always happening, something is always changing, something is always moving. I think poor Mark would be rolling in his grave if he found out that we split up all of his immediatelys and read them slowly over a period of months. Poor thing.

So in order to do Mark justice today, we need to put this text into the context that he set up for us. And, if you would like to play a little game, grab a pen from the pew in front of you and please make a tally of all the times Mark says ‘immediately.’

Three weeks ago, our gospel passage was Mark, chapter one, starting with verse 16. And Mark wrote, “As Jesus passed along the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.’” And immediately, they left their nets and followed him. He went a little farther and saw two more brothers, James and John, who were in their boat mending their nets. Immediately, he called them, and

they left their father Zebedee and followed him.”

Two weeks ago, we continued the story from verse 21: “Immediately, they went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were amazed at his teaching, for he spoke as one having authority. Immediately, someone came into the synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit, and the spirit cried out “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!’ But Jesus said, ‘Be quiet and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit came out of him. The people were all amazed, and they kept on asking each other, ‘What is this? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!’ Immediately, news of Jesus began to spread throughout the region of Galilee.’

This week we continue with verse 29: “Immediately, they left the synagogue in Capernaum and went to the house of Simon Peter and Andrew. They saw that Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her immediately. 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 these things happened in less than 24 hours. The calling of the disciples, the teaching in the synagogue, the healing of the woman. And wow. That was a lot of immediatels. You might be asking yourself: *why* does Mark *do* this?

It's because this good news is good news, and Mark wants you to know it, *urgently*. It's because he knows that anyone who encounters Jesus, who encounters the living God, is changed... immediately. This is life-changing, world-altering good news. Mark tells us that the kingdom is not just near, it is literally here, in our midst, unfolding in acts of service and love that bind strangers together.

Let's zoom in for a second and look at this scene that's unfolding in this house, this one small house in the fishing village of Capernaum on the shores of the sea of Galilee. This woman – Simon Peter's mother-in-law – is sick in bed, and the son of God is brought inside her house. Actually all three of the synoptic gospels include this little moment, this little miracle, and usually, when you're comparing the synoptic gospels, Mark is the brief one, the direct one. But this time... Mark's version of the story is uniquely detailed.

Luke says that Jesus stood over the bed and rebuked the fever, and the fever left her, and she got up. Matthew says that Jesus stood over the bed, touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up.

Mark says that Jesus stood over the bed, took her by the hand, pulled her up off the ground. *Then* the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Did you catch that?

In Luke, she's healed, then she gets up. In Matthew she's healed, then she gets up. In Mark, Jesus pulls her up, and then, she's healed.

It's like Jesus was running at a full sprint, holding his hand out, and she grabbed it, and in *that* moment she was healed.

This woman – this unnamed woman – is extraordinary. She has *one* encounter with the gospel, just one, and *immediately*, she gets up and does the work of the kingdom of heaven.

People, this woman is the first minister of Jesus Christ. Not her sons, the disciples, but her. The Greek word that Mark uses to describe her work is *diakoneo*, where we get our word, deacon. Jesus has healed her – Jesus has restored her to wholeness – and out of that wholeness she joins in with God's work in this world.

Mark tells that when the sun set that night and the sabbath was over, a crowd was gathered at her door, everyone in the village of Capernaum, some fifteen hundred people – word travels fast when you cast out a demon on the sabbath! People had heard of Jesus and came, immediately, to see if they, too, could encounter the good news. And they did... because of her. While Jesus was doing the work of healing and the disciples were doing who knows what, that woman was doing the work of fellowship. It would have been her job to get the water for the guests. It would have been her job to stoke the fire in the courtyard, to pass out bread and fish and salt, to make sure no visitor under her roof

was hungry, or thirsty, or cold.

Her service for the kingdom of God continued far beyond this day.

This woman's house would become the cornerstone of Jesus's ministry in Galilee. This is the house where he stayed every time he came through Capernaum – *her* house. This is the house that had the roof cut open so the paralyzed man could be lowered in. This is the house where Jesus stayed after the sermon on the mount. This is the house where Jesus's disciples gathered after he died. Her hospitality made it happen. Her *diakoneo* made it happen.

And this is the house that would become a church. Her house, a meeting-place for the people of God. At first it stayed a house and then it became something bigger. Followers of Jesus would continue to meet there for decades, and then at some point the center room was washed in plaster, decorated for worship, filled with oil lamps, and people who would come by would leave messages carved into the stone walls – there were more than a hundred cataloged – they were messages like “Jesus Christ, heal me” and “Lord have mercy,” messages in Hebrew and Greek and Syriac.¹ And in the third, fourth and fifth centuries, this house, her house, was the destination of many pilgrimages to the holy land. And you can read about it, if you want just look up the diary of Egeria – she was from Spain and she wrote all about her journey in the holy land – or you can read the writings of the pilgrim from Piacenza. He was from Italy, and he visited Capernaum on pilgrimage about two hundred years after Egeria.

And then at some point someone decided that her house was too sacred, too important to the world to get so many visitors, and so they built a church right on top of it, a church that anyone could visit... a church you can still visit. Today the church is on stilts, raised up above the old house - her house.

This woman's home was a place of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God and her work with the people of God has effects that far outlasted her. We don't know her name. But we know her, because we know her love. I can't think of anything more beautiful, more Christian, than that.

So. My dear people of God. During these next few moments of meditation, I invite you to wonder how we can make this church a place in this community that will outlast all of us. A place where God's kingdom can be encountered, for real, through healing, fellowship, and love.