

**5 Epiphany
February 7, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In our Gospel reading this week, the author of Mark's gospel shows us a day in the life of Jesus. As he begins his public ministry, we have an opportunity to follow Jesus around for twenty-four hours, observing what he does, what he says, and what he prioritizes.

In her 1989 book, *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard reminds us of something that is at once obvious and at the same time unsettling: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing." If that is true, what can we learn from this story as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously?

The author of Mark's gospel has a way of telling a story with only the headlines, or just captions under the pictures, leaving the reader to fill in the rest of the story. This section of Mark's gospel races from one event to the next, favoring speed over depth. Still, the headlines, or the captions under the pictures, offer us a clue. What might we learn if we journey with Jesus through a day of his life?

My intention is not to hold up Jesus's daily schedule as a formula or measuring stick for our own. The point isn't to compare our days to his, and despair at our inadequacy. Rather, it is a way to enter into "taking seriously what Jesus took seriously," and therefore moving deeper into our relationship with the divine presence of God that Jesus knew fully.

First of all, Jesus makes the mundane sacred, specifically, the home. This reading begins with Jesus leaving the synagogue after Sabbath worship, entering the home of Simon and Andrew, and spending the rest of the day in that domestic space. This might sound like a trivial detail, but I admire the fact that Jesus remains at home, blessing a humdrum, everyday location with his presence, and honors it as a sacred site.

We know from the rest of the gospels that some of Jesus's most significant encounters happen in homes. He performs his first public miracle at a home in Cana. He raises Jairus's daughter in the synagogue leader's house. His friend, Mary anoints him with oil at her home in Bethany. Respect comes to Zacchaeus when the despised tax collector welcomes Jesus as a houseguest.

Holy things do happen in the those places we call home. God's power and presence are not limited to "official" sacred spaces. Faithful Jews put a mezuzah on the doorframe of their homes, and touch it every time they enter the house, reminding them that it is holy ground.

For me, this delight is a particular comfort during these days of COVID-19, when I am largely stuck at home. There have been many days in the past year when I've felt restless, trapped, and in limbo, as if "real life" has been suspended, and nothing spiritually significant will happen until the world's lockdowns and quarantines are over.

So, I'm grateful to know that Jesus isn't put off by the mundane as I am. He does amazing work in spaces that I consider ordinary. During this pandemic we may have taken for granted those spaces in which we live, but holy things can and do happen there, and as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously we are implored to remember that even in the very familiar setting of our own homes, we can encounter the divine presence of God. What would it be like for us to honor our homes as Jesus honors Simon's in our Gospel reading? To elevate our living spaces as sites for the sacred?

Secondly ... in this one day in the life of Jesus ... we hear that Jesus brings healing by his presence and compassion. Jesus's first act in this week's reading is to heal Simon's mother-in-law. Hearing that she's feverish and bedridden, he goes to her side, takes her by the hand, and lifts her up. Immediately, the fever leaves her body, and is restored to health. Some hours later, the "whole city" gathers around Simon's door, likewise seeking healing from various diseases and demons. Again Jesus cares for them as a compassionate healer, curing many.

Now, I have to admit that I don't always know what to do with Jesus's healing stories. Many people look at them as miracles ... miracles from God's only Son who can do astonishing things because he is divine ... and the fact that he does these astonishing things is proof of his divinity. I really don't want to disappoint anyone, but I am not in that camp.

I do believe that miraculous things happened in the presence of Jesus. The problem I have with miracles is that there are times when I have wanted a miracle, and it never happened. We all know people who are deserving of a miraculous healing, but real miracles are rare, and I ... for one ... am left with the assumption that I must be inadequate and unworthy when it doesn't happen for me.

I find this particularly piercing in the context of the pandemic. Please don't get me wrong ... I love the healing stories in the Gospels. I love the power and compassion with which Jesus touches the sick and the suffering. However, did Jesus ever, for example, visit a feverish woman, take her hand, sit with her ... yet her fever never left her, and Jesus left without curing her? Did he ever sit in the dark with a profoundly depressed man ... just sit quietly? Did he ever keep vigil at a deathbed, and cry with the family as they said goodbye? No resurrection or resuscitation ... just tears?

Obviously, I don't know the answer to these questions. What I do know is that Jesus spent many hours of his life offering whatever compassion, healing, and liberation he could. In this week's story, he heals "many" ... but not necessarily all. He casts out "many demons" ... but not necessarily all. However, the "not all" doesn't prevent him ... he still touches everyone who

reaches out for help, because touch in and of itself is an instrument of hope and healing. He loves without measure, because love cures many ills. He doesn't assume that illness and demon possession are punishments from God, because such assumptions are cruel and wounding.

In short, Jesus offered the sick and the broken his steady presence, his warm embrace, and the good news of the presence of a loving God ... God who is loving even in the midst of the most dire circumstances. For me ... in my ministry ... this has been one of those places where I have learned that taking seriously what Jesus took seriously can open the holy to enter into the most tragic of events ... including this COVID-19 pandemic.

Having said that, I have to admit that during this COVID-19 pandemic, and its lockdowns, I feel terribly inadequate just because I cannot visit, touch, and embrace those who may need it most.

However, maybe our task as healers isn't to perform magic. Maybe spending our days as Jesus spent his means living graciously and compassionately in this vast and often terrible in-between. To offer the comfort of our steady presence ... even if we are physically absent ... to those who suffer. To encourage those in pain to hang on, because the work of recovery is ongoing. To create and to restore community, family, and dignity to those who have to walk through this life sick, weak, and wounded ... even when there is no cure. And, to make sure that no one who has to die abandoned and unloved if we can help it.

Finally, as this day in the life of Jesus moves into the dawn of the next day, Jesus, while it is still dark, goes to a deserted place to spend time with God. We know from many stories in the gospels that prayer was one of Jesus's daily practices. In these stories we see glimpses of Jesus' deeply rooted spiritual life, the source of his strength and vision. We see his need to withdraw ... his hunger for solitary prayer ... his inclination to rest, recuperate, and reorient his heart. He needed time alone. He needed time alone with God. And, if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then prayer is at the top of our list of disciplines to take seriously.

Jesus understood the tension between compassion for others on the one hand, and self-protection on the other hand ... especially in a world bursting with desperate need. Jesus lived with this tension every day, and he was unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude. Even as the crowds throng to him, he felt no shame in retreating when he needed a break.

This is an apt lesson for those of us who live in cultures where tireless striving is a virtue, and the need for rest is considered a weakness. It's also a challenge to those of us who might think about prayer a lot ... without actually setting aside time to pray. When our hours and days are measured, how many of them will we have spent alone with God?

As Anne Dillard said, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."

Can we learn anything from Jesus's choices? Can we learn to hold calling, timing, and need in productive tension? Can we trust that sowing a seed and walking away is sometimes enough? Can we relinquish fame and power, and choose obscurity instead? Can we risk the new and the unknown? Can we establish and honor healthy boundaries? As we sculpt the hours that make up the days that make up our lives, who or what directs our decisions? If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, how might our days be filled with gratitude, healing of ourselves, living in love so that it can be felt by those around us, and fully believing that we are a beloved child of God.

How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. May we, like Jesus, spend ours well.

Amen.