

**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B) February 8, 2009**  
**Church of the Transfiguration, New York, NY**  
**The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, D.Mn., Priest Associate**

**Readings: 2 Kings 4:8-37; Psalm 147; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39**

It is a very special privilege to be in the pulpit at Church of the Transfiguration. I've been connected to this parish since Holy Week in 2006, but this is the first time that Bishop Andrew invited me to preach. I was very excited by the invite and so have tried to not take it personally when I discovered that he'd be actually thousands of miles away in Australia on this day.

Also, by way of introduction, I am a non-stipendiary, non-parochial priest associate of Church of the Transfiguration. Don't you just love the esoteric language of our Episcopal church? In short it means I help out just a little bit here. My full-time ministry is with the Hospice Care program of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. Though I'm not going to speak about my Hospice work this morning, I do hope you know that hospice provides comprehensive and compassionate care for persons living with end-stage life-threatening illness.

What I do want to talk about is Epiphany, especially the insights that Mark's gospel offers about who Jesus is and what it means for our life in Christ. In clear and concise narrative Mark helps us see that the Kingdom of God is at hand in a bold new way in the person of Jesus. If you've been here the last few Sundays, you heard Bp. Andrew speak about the inauguration of Jesus ministry, as presented by Mark. (By the way, did you know if you miss a Sunday you can read the sermon on our website? Sermons are posted each week at [www.littlechurch.org](http://www.littlechurch.org))

Mark's Jesus is a *tour de force*, whose ministry is a rapid succession of mighty works that exhibit in unmistakable fashion, at least for those with eyes to see, signs of the presence of God's kingdom. In Mark, Jesus' actions come through almost more prominently than his words in preaching. Our opening hymn this morning nicely expressed the Markean action-oriented Jesus:

*Manifest in making whole, palsied limbs and fainting soul;  
Manifest in valient fight, quelling all the devil's might;  
Manifest in gracious will, ever bringing good from ill.  
Anthems be to thee addressed, God in man made manifest.*

In the Jesus who heals and restores relationships, who brings good from ill, Mark helps us to know what life in Christ is to be like.

Our gospel starts with the phrase "and immediately" or "as soon as they left the synagogue." Its really a continuation of the prior story which had Jesus teaching and healing in the synagogue at Capernaum, displaying an authority that trumped the Jewish scribes and that ousted a demonic spirit from a man in that synagogue.

He goes from that setting to the home of Simon and Andrew, two fisherman brothers, whom Jesus had just called to be disciples, to be “fishers of men.” There is also, by the way, that other set of fisherman brothers, James and John, in this little entourage.

Jesus is in the house of Simon and Andrew and told that Simon’s mother-in-law is ill with a fever. Without hesitation, Jesus goes to her, takes her by the hand, lifts her up, the fever leaves and immediately she begins to serve them. *(A bit of an aside is in order: in a sort of backhanded way, we thus learn that Simon Peter is married. Yet just a few verses earlier he had left his nets to follow Jesus as a disciple. No doubt there was some interesting marital pillow talk that evening).*

Now a shallow reading of these verses can lead to a distorted reaction: “Oh, isn’t that convenient? Jesus uses his divine healing power to cure her so she can get food for them.” But, in fact, something quite different and radical is being depicted about the kingdom of God that Jesus is revealing.

Again, we need some context for these compacted verses:

- In the synagogue Jesus had commanded an unclean spirit out of a man.
- In this home, he heals a woman with a fever.
- One miracle is in the spirit world – the other is in the physical.
- One to a male – one to a female
- One occurs in a holy place (synagogue) – the other a humble place (home).
- Both occur on the Sabbath, a holy day when Jewish law forbids such activity.

Together these two miracles demonstrate there is no limit to Jesus’ power and authority. Mark is telling us that both the demonic and the physical as well as the whole bastion of Jewish law and practice about who is “in” or “out,” who is valued and devalued is upended by this new Kingdom of God.

By healing a woman, Jesus directly challenges the social-cultural-religious values of first century Jewish and Roman law. Even the detail that “he took her by the hand” would shock those originally reading Mark, because she was not his relative, she was sick, and he had just met her. Alarm bells would be ringing. What is going on?

He restores her to her rightful position as the senior woman of the household so that she could preside over serving them food. Feminist theologian, Pheme Perkins (*Mark*, New Interpreters Bible) points out the issue is not servitude, but Jesus honoring this woman’s role and restoring her ability to preside over the hospitality to be offered to the honored guest, Jesus. And if she actually prepared that food, thus working on the Sabbath, that is a further subtext of Mark that the Kingdom of God, manifest in Jesus, was changing and challenging everything.

At the end of the day when the Sabbath was over, we read that “the whole city was gathered around the door” as Jesus cured many who were sick with disease and cast out the demons in others who were probably mentally ill. By the phrase “the whole city” Mark is signaling that Jesus offers a kingdom open to everyone – including all who were typically shut out by Jewish and Roman social order – women, the sick, those considered disturbed and possessed. Jesus is turning the hierarchy upside down and valuing the least, loving the sick and broken, proclaiming a new order in the new Kingdom.

Otherwise, of course, it is very tempting and very human to read this gospel as simply about physical healing and to mistake that for the core of Jesus' teaching. Indeed, this is what happened at the time. The next morning while it was still dark and everyone else was asleep, Jesus went to a deserted place to pray but his disciples hunted till they found him to say, "everyone is searching for you." Everyone was seeking a miracle worker, but Jesus refuses to have the kingdom of God reduced to a quest for personal healing and well-being.

Instead, he takes the disciples out to other towns in Galilee to proclaim a kingdom of God that is not a personal saving from illness and death – but a kingdom that restores relationships and embraces the dignity of each human life as a child of God. Though Jesus healed, it was not an end in and of itself. Jesus himself lived with the fragility of life and the inevitability of death. Instead, the healing miracles are a message about restoration, love, value, inclusion, and grace.

This is mirrored in the first reading from 2 Kings 4 as well, where the hospitality that the Shunammite woman had extended to the holy prophet Elisha is a fundamental context in which to understand both the miracle of her son's birth and his restoration to life by the holy man of God.

And thus, I think, one of the powerful messages of Mark's gospel in this Epiphany season is that life in Christ is not about freedom from illness or, even finally, from death. I know this from my Hospice ministry and my personal life. You, too, know it. But life in Christ is about care and compassion toward one another, it is about revived and loving relationships, about holding each other through the joys and the sorrows of the past, present and the future days. Life in Christ is about kindness, generosity, community and grace.

Some of you are aware that I have been talking with Bp. Andrew and the Vestry about forming a New Member Ministry Committee to help our parish express as fully as we can the welcoming love of Christ for all who walk through our doors.

Now that the construction is completed we have many visitors who, like those in today's gospel, are searching for Jesus in all kinds of different ways. It may be from loneliness, fear, desire for connection, out of anguish, from deep gratefulness, in the context of life transition and new directions. But as people come searching and seeking, each of us represents how this little parish seeks to manifest the life in Christ in NYC, on East 29<sup>th</sup> Street. The "little church around the corner" that could, did and still incarnates the love of Christ. Week by week (and many times during the week) we come to pray, listen, kneel and receive the love of Christ not only in the Holy Eucharist at the High Altar, but from one another as well -- in the pew, in the hallway, at the coffee hour, in the communion of saints.

If you have some ideas about a NMMC, please talk to me about it. And may we be strengthened in our life in Christ to welcome all as we all seek and find Christ, most especially in the other. **Amen.**