

Sermon, February 7, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome the talented duo of Debi and Sean Beachy who will provide special music. Hopefully before long we will be able to worship in person again. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now today's stupid joke—

Hubert Humphrey said behind every successful husband is a proud wife and a surprised mother-in-law. Henny Youngman said he told his mother-in-law, "My house is your house." So she sold it. Youngman used to open his act saying, "I just got back from a pleasure trip. I took my mother-in-law to the airport." Why today, mother-in-law jokes? Be patient. You'll see.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, you sent your only Son as the word of life for our eyes to see, and our ears to hear. Help us to believe with joy what the Scriptures proclaim, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fortieth chapter.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,

when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? 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. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for 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 faint. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.

As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.

And he cured 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. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him,

"Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Yeah, I laugh at Mother-in-law jokes too, but I honestly can't relate to them. I love my mother-in-law, and I think it's mutual. One commentary I read said today's account of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law has an especially awkward placement. It follows Jesus' temptation by the devil, wedged between his exorcising a demon and cleansing a leper. So the narrative sequence is devil-demon-mother-in-law-leper. Maybe THIS was the first ever mother-in-law joke.

The big discussion on my Pastor's Facebook group this week was whether or not Jesus violated the Sabbath by healing Peter's Mother-in-Law; and if SHE then violated the Sabbath by "serving" them after she was healed. Nobody asked me, but the correct answers are "No" and "No." Under a sabbath rule called "PiKUAach Nefesh," which means "preserving life," if a life is in danger, either by illness or otherwise, a Jew is not only allowed, but required to take whatever steps are necessary to save it, Sabbath or no.

And serving guests in your home is one's solemn obligation under Judaism's hospitality laws, even on the Sabbath. You just aren't allowed to cook food. Serving leftovers or making PB&J's would be just fine.

Sabbath meals were normally cooked the day before the Sabbath. Which is why it is called the "yom hakino," or "Day of Preparation."

If I had written this story, I might have had Peter's wife do the serving, and Jesus say to her mother, "Relax. Take it easy. There's the couch. Here's the remote." But our world is not their world, and their values were not necessarily ours. Cultural Anthropologists say the Near East had a different social order, and a distinctive view of sickness and illness that is often lost on us.

In fact, they distinguished sickness from illness. To be sick meant something was physically or psychologically wrong with you. Maybe a demon or unclean spirit was involved. Maybe not.

But being in a state of illness meant that because you were sick or otherwise compromised you couldn't fulfill your proper role in the family or group to which you belonged. And that was a much more troubling situation.

Theirs was what's known today as a collectivist society, where one's worth was determined not by individual merit, but by what they contributed to the family, or community. Sickness is certainly never fun. But illness in their world brought guilt, shame and humiliation, which was even worse. Scholars point out that in the gospels Jesus usually seems more concerned with healing illness than curing sickness.

That's something modern medicine and psychiatry have finally figured out as well. That sometimes the focus needn't be on a cure, but instead on helping people to live meaningful and productive lives despite sickness or disability.

We've been reading snippets from Mark chapter one for a few weeks now. This is the second of three healing miracles in the first chapter alone and there will be many more to come.

One thing is for sure, before the Bible's sick or ill people were healed by Jesus, someone usually had to ask. And it isn't always the sick who do the asking. Today it was likely Simon who asked Jesus to care for his ill

mother-in-law, in the first Christian prayer of intercession. So maybe you think a sermon about praying for miracles would be a good thing. I don't.

Because there doesn't seem to be any magic formula for success when praying for miracles, despite how much I wish there was. Prayers for healing have always been an integral part of Christian worship. Sometimes they seem to help, but sometimes they don't. I don't think it is a matter of technique, because there are many acceptable ways to pray in the Bible.

Sometimes folks stand when they pray, and sometimes they sit. In places they also kneel or lie prostrate on the ground. At times Jesus just starts talking to God out of the blue. Apparently if you want to look up at the sky and raise your hands when you pray, that's okay too. Although it doesn't feel very Lutheran.

The Bible says you can pray for yourselves and also pray for others. Jesus prayed alone at times, but often with other people. He prayed silently, but also out loud. Jesus prayed in the wilderness, in the synagogue, on mountain tops and in a garden. In Matthew, Jesus told US to pray quietly in our rooms with the door shut. But then he turned around and taught us a prayer to pray together out loud.

We call that one the Lord's Prayer, and it appears in different forms in three of the four Gospels. While most denominations make the Lord's Prayer part of every worship service, here at St. Mark's we reserve it for only special occasions—like the drop of a hat. We close every Council and Committee meeting with the Lord's Prayer. It always follows our Communion prayer, or closes our worship at non-Communion services.

Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer from chapter six is the one we usually say, although somewhere along the line someone decided it needed a better ending so they tacked on that "for thine is the Kingdom"

part, taken from First Chronicles, chapter 29. Luke's Lord's Prayer is a little shorter, and some like it better.

Scholars believe the earliest form of the Lord's Prayer can be found Mark chapter eleven, where Jesus says, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

Notice he said, "Whenever you **STAND** praying." The Hebrew word for standing is Amidah, and that's the name of the rather lengthy "standing prayers" that are said three times a day by devout Jews.

Scholars think that in the Lord's Prayer Jesus might have been teaching a shorter version of the lengthy Amidah for the benefit of his Gentile followers, who probably wouldn't have known the Jewish standing prayer. The two are actually quite similar. Both hallow God's name and ask for forgiveness. Jews face Jerusalem when they pray the Amidah, so we probably should too when we say the Lord's Prayer. Actually since east is directly behind me, you sort of are right now.

You might think it odd that the ultimate Christian prayer began as a Jewish prayer. But notice Jesus isn't mentioned in the Lord's Prayer, and neither is the Holy Spirit. Good thing Jesus wasn't a student at my seminary, because they wouldn't have liked that. Jesus didn't even tell us to pray this prayer in his name, although we often do.

In fact, there is no reason Jews or Muslims or any person of any faith couldn't say our Lord's Prayer. It might not be a bad idea if they did. The problem with saying the Lord's Prayer so often is that after a while we probably don't pay much attention to the words we are actually saying.

Unlike most prayers, we don't really thank God for anything in the Lord's Prayer, and just like the longer Amidah, we don't really ask for much. Just bare necessities like enough food for today.

The prayer's plea for forgiveness has a caveat that most of us would probably prefer to overlook—we ask to be forgiven only to the extent that we have forgiven other people. That's scary when you think about it. Because as a rule, human beings aren't very good at forgiving. Hopefully God is better.

Perhaps the most important thing The Lord's Prayer does is to help us keep things in their proper perspective, by reminding us that God is in charge of the heavens and the earth, not us. We certainly do not mean to blame God for leading us into temptation, even though it kind of sounds that way. Temptation is one place we have had no trouble finding on our own.

The Lord's Prayer also reminds us that our best protection from all things evil is God himself and our faith in God. Like the Amidah, and unlike most other prayers, our Lord's Prayer really isn't intended so much as a plea to change our circumstances or even to change God. We don't say THY kingdom come, but MY will be done.

Our Lord's Prayer acknowledges we are pretty much satisfied with the way things are. Of course that's not ALWAYS the case. Which unfortunately brings me back to the subject I was trying to avoid: praying for miracles.

I know prayer CAN work miracles. I've seen it. But not every prayer for healing today ends in a cure. But then again, they never have. There are 32 different miracle stories in the Gospels, but certainly not all the sick were healed, and not all storms were stilled. Five thousand might have been miraculously fed one day, but I bet many went hungry the next. Jesus raised a few people from death in the gospels, but not all of them, and we don't know why. Surely those that he did raise died again anyway eventually.

I've heard it said that all prayers are answered, but sometimes the answer is no. Maybe, but I think there is more to prayer than just that. In fact, I think sometimes in prayer God gives us profound answers to questions that maybe weren't even asked.

Sometimes prayer changes our circumstances and sometimes not, but I have never prayed for a miracle that hasn't changed something miraculously. More often than not, it's me. Prayer didn't cure my father's brain cancer or my mother's Parkinson's disease or my brother's multiple organ failure fourteen years after a heart transplant. But I suspect it played a part in giving him those fourteen years. And those prayers also strengthened our family's faith and allowed our fears to give way to the hope of the promised kingdom still to come.

There is not one biblical miracle that amazes me more than the lives I have seen faithful prayers help to transform. Prayer DOES tend to restore PEOPLE, even if not always their health. Of course changes in perspective or outlook don't have all the flash of...say...a suddenly calmed violent storm or an exorcism. But they do provide us the strength and courage, even at the drop of a hat, to dare to say, "Never mind about me. How about, THY kingdom come. And THY will be done."

Amen
