

*Identifying Our Mission*  
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Mark 1:29-39:

*As soon as they 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 sunset, 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.*

There was once a famous monastery that had fallen on hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks, and its big church resounded with the singing of the chant, but now it was nearly deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloister and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: The rabbi walks in the woods. And for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot covered his face with

his hands and began to cry, too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the planks of the table with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your fellow monks are serving God with heavy hearts. You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you this teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must say it aloud again. The messiah is among you." For a while, he was silent. Then the rabbi said, "Now you must go." The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from the rabbi and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud, then he looked at each of his fellows and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the messiah!"

The monks were startled by this. What could it mean? They asked themselves. Is Brother John the messiah? Or Father Matthew? Am I the messiah? What could this mean? They were deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now, which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as people who had finally found something. But they prayed the scriptures together as people who were always looking for something.

Visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks, and before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks, and young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community. Though eventually the rabbi no longer walked in the woods, the monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

It may not be a surprise to you all that I LOVE the Bible. When I open the lectionary reading each week to read the prescribed passage, it's like waking up on Christmas morning. I can't wait to see what the passage is going to present. It's like a treasure chest.

This week's gospel passage was especially filled with jewels. At first, I thought it seemed like the passage should be split into two readings (or pericopes as they are called in seminary) – the first being the part where Jesus heals Simon's mother in law and then the townspeople, and the second being where Jesus goes off by himself to pray. But I see now the brilliance in keeping this as one unit, because it has such a powerful message for us today about epiphany, or divine illumination.

First, off the bat, we need to clarify that Simon in this story, is also he who is later named Peter. Simon, brother of Andrew, the first two disciples in Mark, is given the name Peter by Jesus because Peter, Petra, means rock: Upon this rock I shall build my church, Jesus says in another passage. Simon is the one who becomes Peter of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and St. Peter and Paul's in North Beach. Simon is THAT Peter. So today, because he has not yet been named Peter in chapter 1 of Mark, I will stick to calling him Simon. Just please know this is the guy, Simon is THE Peter.

Last week, if you recall, Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum, a village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was Jesus' first day on the job of his public ministry. The reading today takes place just after this healing in the synagogue, the very same day. We start today with the four disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John, along with Jesus, going to Simon and Andrew's house. I went to this house, it has been discovered and preserved. It is on the outskirts of town, but the town is comprised of houses very close together, so it is not far away. There at the house, Jesus is made aware at once that the mother in law there is sick with a fever.

I read recently that in previous times, fever had the same stigma that mental illness does today. It is an affliction to be spoken of in private and with a hushed tone, likely such as: (whispered) "She has a fever." Jesus is not deterred. He immediately takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and the fever leaves her.

It's the first day of his ministry, and Jesus has already broken two religious rules – don't heal in the synagogue and don't work on the Sabbath. Jesus doesn't seem to restrict himself from when is the proper time or place to heal and save – the time and place is right here, right now. It is always a good time to cast out suffering – whether it be sickness, death, hunger, disability, despair or hopelessness. For Jesus, it is always an opportune time to extend care and compassion.

What does the healed mother in law do? She begins to serve them.

The Greek word for "serve," *diakonei*, is where the word "Deacon" originates. Serve, minister to, as a Deacon does. Simon's mother in law is the first deacon. She is unnamed, but her legacy lives on, today, here in this church and across the world. This woman demonstrates the high honor of service for those who follow Jesus. Like the woman's humble response of service, we do so here – coming in early to set up for coffee hour, preparing the elements for communion, putting out the no parking sign, greeting at the door, rehearsing with the choir, and this is all before the service starts.

Thank goodness Simon's mother in law does serve them, hopefully a good meal, because just after she serves them, they gather up all the sick and possessed and bring them to Jesus there at the house, and then crowds start showing up at the door – the whole city, the passage says. Everyone shows up. Jesus cures many sick with

various diseases and casts out many demons, who knew his power and could not overcome it. They were not permitted to speak and were cast immediately out.

The passage says that when it was still very dark, Jesus went out to a deserted place to pray. If it were me, I might go to the edge of the lakeshore to watch the sunrise, but Jesus goes to a deserted place, deserted here being defined as a dark place of searching and struggle. Maybe he's trying to restore after such a busy first day on the job or maybe he's trying to find direction.

Jesus makes time for prayer. This is central to his ministry right off the bat. He doesn't get caught up in the frenzy of the crowds or maybe he does and that is why he needs some alone time.

Next we read that Simon and his companions *hunted* for Jesus while he was off praying. This is a completely different word than "they sought him" or looked for him. They hunted him down. They were on a mission, and they wouldn't stop until they found him, which they did. "What - what are you doing?!" they cry out, in complete disbelief that he's so far off. "Everyone is searching for you!" Jesus is not meeting their expectations! There are more people to be healed, more people in line, waiting their turn, clamoring at the door. What on earth is he doing out here?

I am absolutely breath-taken by Jesus' response to the disciples who hunt him down and say in exasperation, "Everyone is searching for you!"

Jesus answers, "We gotta move on, so I can take the message to other places, *for that is what I came out to do.*"

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!" I want to cry out, "Stay here! People need you!!!"

There was a TA, or Teacher's Assistant, in one of my seminary classes that said God had to be incarnated as a man, because if it were a woman, all the caring, compassion, selflessness, sacrifice, would have gone unnoticed. This is where Jesus shows more male-tendencies, if I might be so gender-generalized like my TA years ago. I think if the incarnation of God was a woman, Jesusita, she would have gone right back with Simon to Capernaum and put down roots and stayed there. Or maybe I'm just projecting what I would have done. People love me, they want me to stay, I've had an outrageously successful first day on the job, yeah, let's keep it going here!

Jesus has prayed about it and he knows his purpose, he knows what he came out to do. And so he has to leave. Even if he would prefer to stay. He is being propelled to complete his mission. I'm guessing this is what he was praying about and the answer he was given. I'm guessing he was tempted to stay, to be with this adoring tight-knit village and newfound friends. But God has other plans for him.

What are God's plans for you? Why are you here? Not just here at Redwoods in this sanctuary today, though maybe being here, in this moment, in this place, today, has something to do with it. What is God's purpose for your life?

I was at a pastors' retreat last week at Westminster Woods in Occidental, and we were asked to take some time to write down the most meaningful moments of our lives. We took about 15 minutes, and made a list of what came to mind. You can do this at home, or you can even take a moment now, grab an envelope in front of you or a piece of paper, and write down some things that come to mind. Meaningful moments in your life. Significant moments that when you remember, fill you with joy.

We were then asked to link each moment with a moral value, such as family, friendship, relationship, growth, challenge, trust, loyalty, devotion. By reviewing the meaningful moments in our lives and associating them with values, we are able to identify why we are here. What it is we've come to do.

For Simon's mother in law, it was likely to serve. To serve those in her community and their guests, to show hospitality and caregiving. For Simon, it was to lead people to Jesus, to bring people to the source of healing, to show them the way through his own meandering walk of faith. And for Jesus, it was to travel and go to the neighboring towns and proclaim and embody the good news of God's power to overcome what ails us, be it physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, national, corporate or systemic illness. Jesus came to show that God's power to love overcomes any demon holding us back.

Jesus is not going to be led off course from his mission by clamoring crowds begging him to stay or close friends telling him he is crazy or to avoid putting himself in harm's way as Simon will later do. Jesus cannot be confined to a law or a place or to anyone's expectations. He doesn't come for his own self-congratulatory adulation from others but to set things right in the world. To proclaim the reign of God and to cast out anything that distorts it.

In the movie, *The Post*, the editors have come upon a source claiming that the government knew for years that there was no way the US could win the Vietnam War. The owner of the newspaper does not want to print it for fear of incrimination. The editor is clear in purpose when asking, "Wouldn't you face prison to end the war?" This is clarity of purpose and a willingness to stand convicted in one's beliefs and strongest values.

When we identify our values from our list of meaningful moments, we then have a course of action to guide us and keep us on track of our God given mission. Are we living by our values? If we have strayed, can we pray for God to help guide us back on track?

The mission of Redwoods Presbyterian Church has been identified as this: to worship God, to love one another and to serve God by ministering to others locally and throughout the world. Through vital ministries of the church, we seek to develop the gifts of our members and nourish heart, mind, body and soul. We cannot do this alone and so we seek God's guidance, Jesus Christ's example and the Holy Spirit's inspiration. We strive to make known to all people the transforming love and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, including all, excluding none.

Our values? Worship, love, local and international service, development of gifts, and nourishment of all people. All under God's guidance.

The good news is that we each have a purpose, a unique mission for why we are here. We only need to knock, and the door will be opened; seek, and we shall find. God wants to help us find, support, and lead us on our mission – individually, and as a church. Are we headed in the right direction? Are we aware that the messiah is among us, within us? That we individually and as a church have all we need to do the work of Jesus Christ in the world – whether as caring deacon or governing elder or hospitable welcome or questioning worshipper. This is our hope in which the Lord takes pleasure – our hope in God's steadfast love, that we will be witness to it and givers of it.