

## What He Came to Do

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
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*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B*  
Mark 1:29-39



A few years ago, I was sitting next to a colleague watching a newscast in an airport. I remember it was a story about the refugee crisis, which at the time was just starting to enter the consciousness of the American public. A toddler's body had washed ashore on Bodrum Beach in Turkey, and a photo had spread around the world, the little boy dressed in a red shirt, blue pants and tiny black shoes. The photo was arresting to so many because, I think, it highlighted the horror that spared no one of any age, even the most vulnerable – the little children. The civil war in Syria, combined with terrorist acts popping up in lots of places, gave all of us a sense of not knowing what was going to happen next, of being subjected to powers beyond our control.

My colleague and I were waiting on a flight to go to Austin as we watched the news. We were both heading to the seminary to do Doctor of Ministry work. She looked over at me and said, "What they need is Jesus."

I remember at the time being caught off guard by her words. Truthfully, it seemed like one more trite response to a serious, global concern.

It made me think of the story I've heard of a minister doing a children's sermon. He asks, "What's brown and climbs in trees and has a big bushy tail?" Silence. He says, "I know you know this, children. What's brown and climbs in trees and has a big, bushy tail?" One of the children tentatively raises her hand, and when the minister calls on her says, "It sounds like a squirrel, but I'm sure it's Jesus."

That's what came to mind when my colleague made her airport pronouncement, "What they need is Jesus." I thought she was using that word, "Jesus," like a magic talisman, as if she could wave it around, and in doing so, avoid all real thought, or engagement, or compassion. Just say Jesus three times and it will all go away. That's what I was thinking.

So, I asked her, gently, "Could you elaborate on that?"

She looked at me as if it should be obvious. “Just what I said. They need Jesus.”

Now, I must say, the thoughts going through my mind toward my colleague at that moment were not charitable. I thought, frankly, she was being naïve. Did she not comprehend the complexity of the global situation that produced the Syrian civil war, not to mention the ISIS phenomenon across the region that was bringing refugees from other countries as well? Read the Bible, yes, but pick up a newspaper too. “Jesus? That’s all you’ve got?” I kept all these thoughts to myself as our plane boarded.

Today’s text consists of three brief episodes, told in Mark’s telltale breathless style – first this happened, then this, then this. There’s a word for this gospel – feverish. Mark writes at a feverish pace, and the Jesus he speaks of is on the move, God is on the move with no time for a break. There’s so much to do, so much to save people from.

So it seems fitting that when Jesus enters the house of Simon, he finds his mother-in-law laid up in bed with a fever. In a way, she is the embodiment of the gospel to this point – her body is mobilized, doing battle with whatever has invaded it, and even though she isn’t moving, she feels the oppressive heat.

Jesus no sooner helps Peter’s nameless mother-in-law to her feet than they are bringing everyone sick and possessed with demons to him and the whole city – the whole city! – is pressing in on the door. Fever. So much need, so much saving that needs to take place. Mark says he didn’t turn one away.

That’s Mark for you. *Immediately. All* who were sick. The *whole* city. It is big and it is fast and it is feverish – this healing power will not be denied. Everywhere Jesus goes the kingdom draws so near that the demons run and sickness is cured and the fever lifts and everyone comes, the whole city.

And then, an amazing thing happens. Mark slows down. Jesus, very early in the morning, while everyone is still asleep, goes to a deserted place to pray.

I imagine the moon is bright, as it was here recently. The only sounds he hears are the light touch of his feet on the dirt, maybe the occasional stirring animal. He walks and walks until his breathing slows, he finds a spot, and the fever lifts. From this vantage point, in communion with God, he can see more clearly his call, he gains perspective, and he knows what must happen.

It is in that space where things slow down, if but for a moment, that Jesus comes to a kind of clarity. It is in the dark and quiet and solitude that he uncovers what will be key

moving forward. The miracles, the big crowds, the clamoring, the grasping that culminates in his disciples hunting him down, these are not the things he came to do. What he came to do was bring a message. What is that message? The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. It is the same message he delivered to the disciples, calling them to drop their nets and leave their families and follow me. Follow me.

“That is what I came to do,” announces Jesus. And what he came to do has not changed. It is proclaimed from pulpits around the world. It is signed in water and bread and wine. It is discovered in community study. It is walked in mission and service. That is what he came to do. That is what we are here to do.

And the demons are out there. There’s no denying it. I’m not talking about little devils with pitchforks and horns, and I’m not talking about the sort of thing you might see in a horror movie. No, when the Bible speaks of demons, it is more in the sense of what Paul meant when he talked about principalities and powers. It is those things that seem to assert themselves from outside of us. They seem out of our control. In the ancient world, all kinds of maladies could be ascribed to demons. It was a way of talking about those things that seem to assail us and for which we have no words. Like a little boy drowning in the sea and washing ashore, a victim of forces so much larger than his little body and mind could comprehend or defend. Demonic.

I think it is easy to fall into the pattern of the disciples, particularly Simon Peter, in this story. They really do not understand who Jesus really is. That misunderstanding will be evident throughout the gospel of Mark. All they know is that large crowds follow him – the whole city – and that sicknesses are cured and demons flee. So when he tries to find solitude they hunt him down and try to get him to return to the fray. “They need more Jesus...”

Contrast their response with Peter’s mother-in-law, the one healed of her fever early in the reading. Her response is to get up, newly restored, and serve Jesus. She will be joined by other women in this gospel, the poor widow, the woman who comes in and anoints Jesus, the woman at the cross, the women at the tomb. While Simon hunts Jesus down to care for crowds clamoring for more healing, while he, himself, does nothing for them; others seem to understand that to be touched by Jesus is to be called to a life of response to Jesus, a response of loving service, of faithful following in his way.

Jesus rejects a response to himself that focuses exclusively on his miracles. I believe he continues to reject such a response. He came to bring a message – the nearness of the kingdom. He came to call followers to walk in the light of that kingdom. My colleague was only partly right, I think. Of course, they need Jesus, those who are beset

by those forces that seem to have their way with them. We all do. But to the extent that that means throwing up our hands and hunting him down and demanding that he do something, then we are also missing what he came to do.

*We* are his body, *we* are those summoned to respond to his touch, to follow in his way. And, thanks be to God, I see evidence of that following in this place every day. Whether far away, in the very region where that little boy washed ashore, facing the demonic with loving service; or close to home in visiting in the home or hospital of someone who is sick and longing for a compassionate touch; or those of you who give your time to walk alongside a confirmation student for nine months, exploring this word that Jesus came to give – “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” – or youth who week in and week out continue to ponder and live what it means to welcome all and make room, more room, for those drawn to the community formed by this message; I am inspired by the ways you remember what Jesus came to do and calls us to do.

Jesus is not just a name. He cannot be waved around like a magic wand to make everything better. Jesus is a way in the world. His summons is not away from the pain and suffering of the world, but toward it. His summons is not to a life of isolated remove, but to life in community where love creates vulnerability and we take the risks that love entails, together. Most importantly, his way is not a cynical hopelessness satisfied with easy pronouncements, but with the messy hope that walks in the way of the kingdom that has drawn near. Most importantly, Jesus is alive, and Jesus is here, and his Spirit is at work in the world.

Mark’s gospel is feverish. This happened, and then this, and then this. And one day, the Spirit called a group of people from FPC to the very place where that toddler washed ashore. Cathy McCall, one of the participants, recently wrote:

“In light of all, instead of giving over to a despair of the situation, or giving reign to my own small frustrations, I am reminded that God loves, sees and hears all of his children and his heart is broken at such pain and suffering. Because of this, we can rest in His Spirit and allow our own spirits to be so guided as we do the work of each day.”

That is what he came to do. May it be so. Amen.