

February 5, 2012
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

“Expectations and Reality”

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalms 147:1-12, 21C
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Good morning! Given what day it is, I think I'll begin with that most sacred and traditional question asked every year around the 4th or 5th Sunday after the Epiphany: “Are you ready for some football?!”

Now, coming up with a segue from the Super Bowl to today's Gospel wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. But can't you see at least something of a stylistic parallel between the fast pace of events in Mark's narrative, and how things play out following the two-minute warning?! No? Alright then, since I have no more defense for this already strained, opening kick-off metaphor, let's move ahead to the business at hand.

As most of you know, what we call Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four. And one of its chief characteristics, as Stephanie noted two weeks ago, is that it portrays Jesus as almost constantly active. In fact, as My Oxford Annotated Bible points out, the Greek word for *immediately* or *at once* or *then* appears roughly 40 times in the 16 chapters, so there's a real sense of urgency in this Gospel.

When I first started looking at this text three weeks ago, I found I was also sharing something of the same experience Stephanie described last week. I was hoping, of course, that something in the narrative would easily lead me to some amazing and transformative reflections. But it didn't even look like I was going to be cursed – or blessed! – with anything as juicy as the idols and demons Stephanie ended up with. (Lucky woman!)

So initially I couldn't see anything especially noteworthy about this passage. But as I read and re-read and re-re-read this text, and dipped into commentaries by others, I eventually discovered that Mark indeed had some specific and important reasons for relating the particular series of events in these 11 verses, and I'm going to share a little of this here.

It's helpful to recall that this today's passage is part of a continuum that began two weeks ago and continued last week. I mention this because what goes on in today's passage relates back to things said – and some things not said – in those previous readings.

Many of the commentaries on today's text break them into three or four somewhat distinct topics, and this works for me. For example, verses 29-31 describe Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law which is interesting in and of itself because it's the first account of an actual healing in Mark's Gospel. (Yes, Jesus did cast out an unclean spirit in last week's reading, but that's not the same as what he does in this passage). Probably more importantly, however, this event also involves the breaking of several taboos or rules which Jews were expected to observe scrupulously.

Underline that word “expected” because we'll shortly consider how Jesus' ongoing actions seemed to constantly conflict with the expectations of his followers. But for now, let's just note that this event describes the violations of several rules in that (1) Jesus touches a woman who was not a blood relative, (2) the presence of the fever shows she was unclean, (3) he performs this act on the Sabbath, and (4) Simon's mother-in-law gets up to do work on the Sabbath.

Now I bet that several of you – especially those of the female persuasion – stopped listening the moment you heard “the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” On the surface of it, this does sound outrageous – some of you are probably muttering “typical.”

I mean, my God, here's a woman so ill with a fever that she is unable to greet her guests and show them the hospitality that was her place in that culture and time, so she must have been sick indeed! But then, as soon as Jesus had touched and healed her, she pops right up and gets on with her usual business, fixing up a mess of grits or whatever, just for these slackers – who, by the way, have apparently done nothing more so far that day than fiddle it away in the synagogue!

Let's concede then that this does seem outrageous – or “typical” if you like – on the surface of it. But as one commentator notes, while this woman lay wracked with fever, she also was unable to fulfill the role accorded to the senior woman in the household. In short, the privilege of showing hospitality to important guests would have fallen to Simon's mother-in-law as a matter of honor, not servitude.” [Boston College theologian Pheme Perkins, introduction to *Mark*, New Interpreters Bible]. So the totality of what's happening here is that Jesus is not only healing this woman physically, but restoring her also to her rightful place of honor in that household and society.

I've lingered on this first event because it sets the scene for what happens in the rest of this passage, and especially the tension that emerges between Jesus' understanding of the purpose of his ministry, and the expectations of his followers and the larger community. Now except for Jesus' exorcism of the unclean spirit in the man in the synagogue in last week's reading, we really have no reason to think that his followers would have expected him to actually heal Simon's mother-in-law. All we're given to know from the text we hear this week is that “they told him about her at once.”

But he does proceed to heal her, and apparently immediately! So if they didn't have an expectation of him as a healer before this, I bet they certainly did after. In fact, they proceed to act on this that same evening, bringing to him “all who were sick or possessed with demons . . . And he cured many . . . with various diseases, and cast out many demons,” etc. In other words, by the end of the next three verses, Jesus has fulfilled their new expectation – in spades!

The tension between the followers' expectations and Jesus' understanding (or phrased another way, Jesus' reality) is a constant theme weaving through the narrative of his life and the world's experience of him in his time, and ever since. Of course, this tension between expectations and reality is something we also grapple with in our own lives – in our relationship with the Holy, with our spouse or partner, with our children, our jobs, our parish – in fact, in virtually every dimension of our lives.

For me personally, managing expectations is one of my primary responsibilities in my work in disaster response and recovery. I spend a lot of time managing the expectations of disaster survivors as to what can realistically be done for them.

I spend even more time teaching volunteers and volunteer organizations how crucial this is in their work with these survivors. For example, we never – repeat, never – promise survivors that we will be able to return them to the life they knew before, what they remember as “normal.” In truth, there's no way anyone can actually do that.

We also never promise that we can deliver or restore X, Y or Z, so it's also crucial to manage the expectations of the volunteers as to what they can accomplish. Their own passionate expectations of bringing others back to joy and wholeness are often extremely difficult or even impossible to fulfill, and the reality is that we will never be able to do for the survivors all that the survivors need or hope for.

I'm happy to talk more about this at another time, but let's go back now to the expectations of Jesus from that evening of intensive healing in Capernaum. One of the more insightful and entertaining takes on this and what follows comes from James Liggett, currently rector of an Episcopal church in Midland, Texas. His original text is far too good to paraphrase, so here's the key part of what he has to say in his own words.

“Jesus impressed the socks off everybody; he was probably the most exciting thing that had happened in the town since somebody burned down the tax office.”

[Side note: for those of you who did not grow up in Texas, burning down the tax office would be a considered a highly valued and patriotic act in conservative Midland.]

Liggett continues:

“Most likely the town really liked what Jesus had done, and they really wanted to keep him there so he could keep on doing it.”

[Another side note: fast forward to the next three verses where his followers hunt him down when he's gone away before dawn to pray, and when they find him, exclaim: “Everyone is searching for you.”]

Liggett again:

“The group searching for him was probably the first century equivalent of a joint committee of the ministerial alliance, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Economic Development Board. . . .

“They were working on an offer to Jesus that he couldn't refuse: they wanted him to set up shop in Capernaum – establish the Jesus of Nazareth Preaching and Healing Mission. The pay and benefits would be great [to say nothing of the financial returns to the town elders and merchants!], the hours negotiable, housing would doubtless be provided, and taxes could be deferred indefinitely.

“There was no doubt that Jesus could really put Capernaum on the map. The tourist trade and healing business would be good for everybody – think Lourdes with a money-back guarantee – the tax base would grow wonderfully, business would improve, and the citizens would have their own miracle worker around the next time they got sick. It was a swell deal for everybody. Really, it was a good deal.”

Shall we assume this seemed even more appealing for Simon and his companions? After all, Capernaum and the surrounding hills were their 'hood, and I imagine that the prospect of settling down here permanently like this would probably look pretty peachy. I mean, who wouldn't want to follow a Jesus who could deliver something like this, especially if you didn't have to actually follow him anywhere else?!

But if that was the expectation of the guys from Galilee and the larger community – and there's some indication it was – it was clearly not Jesus's reality and not his understanding of the primary focus of his ministry. No, he articulates that himself very straightforwardly at the end of this passage: “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.”

Eugene Peterson's recasting of this verse in *The Message* makes this even more accessible: “Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come.”

“This is why I've come.” So clearly there is some tension here. The reality is that Jesus understood that what he had been sent to accomplish was different – and infinitely larger – than the expectations of those he had just recently recruited. Mark doesn't tell us directly what his followers understood to be Jesus' true purpose at this point, but there's certainly the impression that healing and casting out demons alone might have been enough.

But Jesus knows they must move on from this to something far more important. I can even imagine that he knew inherently that in healing one person at a time, he would never be able to accomplish his greater purpose that would be gained only through his teaching and example, and finally, his death and resurrection. I think he understood that his greater purpose was to be the restoration of an entire people and an entire world to a relationship of wholeness intended by his father.

Well, is there meaning for us here at St. Stephen's, in thinking about the tensions between our own understanding and our expectations of our individual and corporate ministries? For instance, do we understand that our current and anticipated financial reality may increasingly mean we will not be able to meet all of our expectations?

Could it be that God may not be concerned with us maintaining everything we've come to expect across the years? Perhaps he even has a different understanding and vision of a greater reality for us than our current expectations allow us to comprehend.

To be sure, we are a parish with considerable abundance in comparison with many others throughout the city, and across the diocese and across the country. We need to acknowledge and bless the abundance that we have. But perhaps we are coming to a point as a parish where we can't help but recognize that the diminishing financial reality we are facing can no longer provide what we've come to expect. Or maybe the real message

is that we need to do something bold about changing that reality, rather than adjusting the expectations. And if so, what do we understand our own responsibilities to be to try and change that reality?

I don't want to shock anyone, but over time every church becomes very practiced at polishing and protecting idols of many kinds, as well as in demonizing those perceived to not be meeting our expectations. I'm personally guilty of this, have been in the past and not doubt will be again, and I suspect I'm not alone.

But I'd like to suggest one quick little tool passed on to me by my friend, Wayne McCleskey. I use this little formula frequently in my own work in trying to manage expectations. It is, simply: $X \text{ minus } R \text{ equals } D$, where X equals Expectation, R equals Reality, and D equals Disappointment. So . . . when we begin to allow our Disappointments to play the starring role in our own drama within St. Stephen's, perhaps we also need to pay attention to our own Expectations of the parish and of each other, and see how that matches with the Reality we face.

Well, that's enough for now, so let's end on a hopeful note with some very familiar words from that master of Victorian narrative, Charles Dickens, whose 200th birthday we will celebrate this Tuesday. Given what we've been talking about, you might think this would be from *Great Expectations*, but it's not. No, this is from Dickens' most performed work, *A Christmas Carol*. And if you've now guessed where this is going, feel free to join me in these words of the youngest Cratchit child, Tiny Tim, and wish for all of us in this tension between our expectations and our reality: "God bless us, every one."

Indeed! And amen.

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