

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 1:29-39

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The energy of this story is a continuation of the story of the exorcism of the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is the least dramatic of all of the healings in the Gospel of Mark but it is for that reason particularly significant. Jesus and his four disciples left the synagogue on this big day, the first day of Jesus' ministry, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law, who apparently lived with Simon, was in bed with a fever. Jesus goes in, takes her by the hand, and the fever leaves her, and she serves them dinner. This is Jesus' first act of healing and it is a sign of Jesus' concern for even small illnesses and his authority over them. Not only then does he cast out demons, but he also heals those who are sick.

That evening, they bring to him all the people in the whole town who are sick with various diseases and who are possessed with demons. This is a story of great enthusiasm and joy at the new possibilities that Jesus brings. And the key word is the Greek word, *euthus*, "immediately." Mark uses the word three times in the story of the exorcism (1.21, 23, 28) and twice in this story (1.29, 30). Unfortunately, the NRSV and NIV translators, none of whom are storytellers, decided it was redundant and left it out of these two stories (1.21-34), sometimes translating it as "as soon as" or "at once." (NIV has "immediately" in 1.30) The impact of the frequent repetition of *euthus* in these initial stories (also in 1.12, 18, 20 where it is translated in the NRSV) is to create a sense of action and immediacy. I would suggest that you put "immediately" back into this story and tell it with gusto. It is the storytelling equivalent of an action movie's fast-moving scenes. This story is the climax of Jesus' first day in which he has gone into action. The story ends with Jesus healing many who are sick and he casting out many demons. In this episode, Mark makes it explicit that the unclean spirits are demons (1.32, 34 twice) that Jesus casts out.

Another sign of his authority over the powers of evil is that he will not allow the demons to speak because they recognize them. The demons know that he is the one who has authority over them and so Jesus wouldn't even allow them to speak. The story of Jesus' prayer the next morning is first of all a sign of Jesus' connection with God. After this amazing first day of ministry, Jesus goes out into the countryside, early in the morning before dawn, and prays. Everybody is looking for him because they want to have another day like they did the day before but instead of staying in Capernaum, Jesus expands his mission and the message of the kingdom of God. The action of the establishment of the kingdom of God begins to radiate out from Capernaum throughout all of Galilee where he proclaims the message of the kingdom of God in the synagogues and casts out many demons.

This story is a sign of the immediate power of Jesus' teaching and of his authority to heal, to cast out demons, and to establish the peace and health of the kingdom of God. The

energy of telling this story is, first of all, to create the intimate and quiet atmosphere of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. In contrast to the public space of the synagogue in the previous story, Simon's mother-in-law is in a private house in a little bedroom. It is also implied that the storyteller expresses a tone of amazement and surprise at Jesus' action. The bringing together of all the people of the town is more expansive. You want to draw the visual picture of the whole village gathered together. It takes a big gesture and you want to encourage your listeners to see all these people gathered around the door of the house, the entire town, with people who are sick and others who are possessed with various unclean spirits and Jesus going through the crowd healing them and casting out the unclean spirits. It is a BIG scene, so the way you tell the story needs to increase in volume and the gestures need to get bigger in order to convey the change in pace and scale from the earlier story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. And once again, the tone of the storyteller is wonder.

The next episode of Jesus going out to pray is again very quiet. It has a contemplative feel about it. When Simon and the others find him, they say with excitement, "Everybody is looking for you," But Jesus is calm and knows what he is going to do: "let's go on to the next towns." He is not impressed by his immediate popularity but has a job to do. The energy of this story then is an **immediate** extension of the power of the kingdom of God.

Why is this story significant? In the earlier stories of the messiahs of Israel, Saul and David, their anointing is followed by great military victories, Saul's deliverance of the people of Jabesh-Gilead from Nahash, the Ammonite (I Sam. 11.1-11) and David's defeat of Goliath (I Sam. 17). They immediately establish their authority and demonstrate that they have been anointed by God by decisive military interventions against the enemies of the people of Israel. The emperors of Rome such as Caesar Augustus also establish peace by destroying their enemies and dominating others. Jesus' actions are equally immediate and decisive but he establishes a health care system for the sick and mentally ill people of Capernaum. He attacks the powers of evil with a different strategy. Jesus' interventions are non-violent and directed at the grass-roots problems of the nation. They are also surprising and are a radical reversal of the audience's expectations of what a Messiah will do.

The same issue is present for us now. How are the powers of evil to be defeated? By violence and by decisive military action as many of our world leaders continue to believe or by establishing comprehensive health care and non-violent interventions with the powers of evil in the world? The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus has revealed another way of establishing the kingdom of God. Rather than continuing the endless human cycle of violence, warfare, revenge, and retribution, Jesus breaks the cycle by acts of compassion, healing, and demonstrated control of the powers of evil.