

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday of Advent: December 17, 2023

“Ministering and Proclaiming”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this third Sunday of Advent. I want to thank you for allowing me some brief time off before the holiday. While I was away, I was able to watch our church service on Facebook. I totally enjoyed hearing from Pastor Addis on how our stories in Mark, beginning with Jesus' call to ministry, then Jesus' ability to conquer evil, to today's ministry of healing people, is all progressed into claiming Christ is Lord. This is also the Sunday we honor women, the pink Sunday.

For those in Jesus' time there was no separation between evil and illness. It was often thought that one or their parents had done a great crime or sin and therefore became ill, was born with a defect, or that mental health disease was the work of the devil. Now I admit, I do believe there is evil in the world, and illnesses often have a spiritual and emotional component, but the story of Jesus' healing of Simon's wife's mother has a very significant meaning at this stage of Jesus' ministry.

The Gospel of Mark, although containing everything a Gospel needs to proclaim the good news of Christ, is one of the oldest writings if not the first, and in its original form it was never quite finished. So in our story today of healing Simon's wife's mother we will start with a look at her relationship to Simon. We may get a sense of relationship by looking at our

Old Testament reading where you can be a wife, and sister in a way, as one tried to keep their Jewish ancestral lines intact.

So Jesus, a non-related male, goes into the inner room of the house (the bedroom per se) and lifts up this women who is a stranger to him. Jesus takes her by the hand and her fever leaves her. For some, this is a simple reading that shows us our path to recognizing Jesus as Messiah and that Jesus has the God-given power to heal. And while all of this is beautiful, I would like to share the perspective of Mary Ann Tolbert from the Women's Commentary.

Tolbert explains that the sick women was conforming to society's norms by being tucked in a back room. The idea that a strange man would dare enter a home and go to those back rooms, the one's women shared with each other away from the men, is breaking a long-held barrier. Women did not worship with men. And strange men who were religious or spiritual certainly did not attend to a strange women in the privacy of her home.

But there is more to the exchange. Unlike the second healing story of this reading, Simon's mother-in-law, once she was well, began to "serve or minister" to Jesus and those in the home. Tolbert has done her research and presents a connection to the Greek word "serve or minister" that is presented in this reading with a deeper connection. For Tolbert, the word used for "serve or minister" in our reading today is the same "minister" that the angels provided for Jesus in the desert fighting evil after his baptism.

What Tolbert would like to stress is the showing of reciprocity. There is a male serving and a female serving each other in a very private way on a spiritual level that is not observed in that society at that time. The woman, appreciative of her healing, “ministered” to Jesus just as the angels “ministered” to Jesus. This is not a submissive or lowering of one’s position, to serve as the angels serve. We also know this ministering did not stop with her own family, but continued as she opened her home to others who needed healing.

Tolbert would like us to take a moment to digest the ground-breaking idea that Jesus is presenting. God’s healing is reciprocal, and not hierarchy based. God’s healing breaks through barriers that have been constructed by humankind and that often restrict and restrain growth. And lastly, humankind, just as all creatures created by God, has the capacity to minister to each other just as the angels in heaven. For those of us who have heard constantly about the calling of men for ministry, this scripture in Mark, once observed in this context can be a very freeing message. It can, as it is called, be Gospel, be good news. Which then leads us to the next story.

Jesus is confronted with a man suffering from a skin disease. Our particular reading uses the pronoun "person", however traditionally it is rendered man. This would make these two stories that contain a gender difference for a response. This person doesn’t choose to minister to Jesus, but instead, against Jesus’ instructions, begins to proclaim his healing rather than go the traditional route of showing himself to the Temple priests, therefore causing problems for Jesus.

This shows not only the contrast of responses possible when Christ comes into your life, but also the differences in gifts of the spirit. Some of us serve by doing, other serve by proclaiming. But what we all have in common is that we have been touched by Jesus in some way that has healed us, changed us.

During Jesus' time, he was not the only one that could heal people. And although he never claimed he was the Messiah, his actions did. Yet there were others in that time going from town to town declaring they were Israel's savior. People were expecting a king-like authority, a political activist, a soldier to save them. And for those who were healing others, God bless them, but the question remains, were those people changed?

Those who witnessed Jesus' boundary-breaking ministry break forth, changed. For some their bodies were healed, for others their spirit restored. As we wait for Jesus to come, we contemplate on how we will minister to and for Jesus in others, and how our lives will proclaim his grace. And also, how we have been changed! Amen.