

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 9, AD 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Mark 1:29-39

²⁹ *As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. ³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.*

³² *That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.*

³⁵ *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"*

³⁸ *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (NIV)*

Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness!

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Our Lord Jesus,

Did you catch this? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss till dawn... My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again. (Job 7:2-4,6,7) Is it just me, or is that one of the most depressing parts of the Bible there is? "My days come to an end without hope... my eyes will never see happiness again." That's dark.

We'd like to think that it's an aberration, that the case of Job is unique. In a sense, it is. The suffering he endured must rank right up there with the most horrifying and intense suffering anyone has ever known. But we'd like to think, wouldn't we, that it's just not normal for someone to feel this depressed, this dark, this hopeless. And people like us who believe in God—certainly we're exempt from this kind of suffering, right?

But we know—many of us painfully well—that this intense suffering is not that uncommon. Many of us in this room have been through times like this. And if history is any indication, there are more times like this coming.

Jesus encountered this kind of darkness. It came in many forms. Today we hear about him being surrounded by it. Life threatening illnesses, demon possession, temptation, stress—all these dark and depressing things surrounded him and threatened to engulf him. If we had been in his place, we might have been swallowed

up. But Jesus was not. Instead of the darkness breaking his back, he broke it. With his actions, with his words, he fought against the darkness, and he won. Today, as we listen to St. Mark describing a day in the life of Jesus, let's remember that the power of Jesus is at work among us, too. And let's Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness!

Jesus breaks the darkness with his actions

This day in the life of Jesus began with a shriek. We heard about it last week. Jesus had preached in the synagogue in the city of Capernaum and impressed people with his authority. Jesus had then exorcised a demon, expelling an evil spirit from a man who was possessed, and the demon had left the man with a shriek. Already that day Jesus had witnessed people in pain, people who needed his help.

And now, as we pick up in Mark's Gospel, another need is brought to Jesus' attention. Jesus and his disciples have gone over to Simon Peter and Andrew's home for the afternoon meal. When they arrive, Simon finds that his mother-in-law is seriously ill, in bed with a high fever. Everyone is concerned; in the first century AD, a high fever could be a sign of a deadly illness. Simon Peter and the others brief Jesus on the situation. They've seen his almighty power at work. Will he use it now to help this family member?

He will. Jesus doesn't ignore the need of Peter's mother-in-law. He helped her, healing her disease. Luke tells us that Jesus spoke a few words, and the fever disappeared. Jesus took the woman's hand, helped her up, and she was fine. Jesus faced the darkness of severe illness, and he broke it.

Many of you have faced this dark situation—suffering through sickness and disease. And many of you have been privileged to see Jesus' power over disease. I'm talking not only about miracle cures, but also Jesus' power exercised through medical technology. Now, Jesus does not heal every single disease. In his wisdom he allows many to go on, even using diseases to bring his people closer to him. But think about this: how many of the people in this room wouldn't be here if not for modern medicine? Do we think that's just good luck that people have access to the medical treatments they need, many of which are amazing? The power of God is behind the healing and the preservation of life that medical science produces.

Jesus healed people miraculously. He saw the darkness of a sin-filled, broken and fallen world, and he acted to break the darkness. He still does. He wants us to know that he is the almighty Son of God, and that through him there is release from darkness and the power of death. All this so that we, like his first disciples, will turn to him when our lives get dark.

Make know mistake—Jesus knows darkness

We're talking about Jesus breaking the darkness. But did Jesus know darkness? By experience, I mean. Did he really know the depths of darkness that people go through?

He did. We know about the cross. It was hell that he suffered on the cross. The darkness that fell on Calvary was but a shadow of the darkness of death Jesus was suffering. But before the cross, even here in the very first chapter of Mark, we find Jesus encountering darkness.

For one, there was the darkness of all the human sadness and brokenness that he witnessed. People with diseases, demon possession—it must have taken its toll. Jesus had not created people to suffer, but to live.

More darkness is hinted at. Jesus had gone away by himself to pray. That's part of the way he dealt with the darkness he saw all around him. But he wasn't alone for long. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Something else Jesus knew was pressure. Throngs of people demanding his attention.

And there was the stress of being surrounded by people who didn't understand him. Not to say that the people around him didn't love him. All the people who came to Jesus for healing, all his disciples—they loved Jesus. But sometimes, it seemed that they loved him not just for who he was—the Son of God, their Redeemer—but for what he could do for them. They loved him because he was useful to them.

Do you know what that's like? Is that the attitude you get from your employer maybe? You're a warm body with not much personal value. Or is this the attitude we have toward Jesus sometimes? He's as valuable as what he can do for us.

Jesus felt the darkness of human sinfulness all around him, as it manifested itself in broken bodies, in tortured souls, and even in the lack of love toward him. Jesus knew—Jesus *knows*—darkness.

Jesus breaks the darkness with his words

When the disciples finally track Jesus down and tell him everybody's looking for him, what does he say? "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

That seems odd, doesn't it? Even cruel? Here are all these people, sick, demon-possessed, and Jesus goes away from them. Why? To preach. Doesn't it seem as if Jesus could do more good by staying and healing people than by going and talking?

First of all, we should note that Jesus continued to heal people, wherever he went. And he continued to throw demons out of people's bodies. Second, Jesus knew something. As amazing as it was that he could heal people's bodies, he knew that people could live physically fit all their lives and, yet still lose their lives eternally at death. Jesus, therefore, continued to heal people's bodies and their souls. He continued to give and sustain physical life, while he also gave and sustained spiritual life. He not only broke the dark hold of disease, but also the darkness of condemnation of a holy God, the darkness of hell. And he broke that darkness with his words.

When the President travels on Air Force One, dozens of news reporters follow him. When he speaks, there's the press, listening to his every word and recording it. I've noticed that I don't have dozens of reporters following me around, waiting on my every word. When I travel, I don't need to make room for camera crews and anchor people and reporters. When I open my mouth to speak, say, at the dinner table, there are no microphones and tape recorders in my face.

What's the difference between the President and me? In the eyes of the press (and most other people), I don't have power. He does. When the President speaks, millions of lives are potentially affected. He can announce policy initiatives. He can affect world affairs with the things he says. He has power. The things he says make a difference.

The things Jesus says make a difference. With a word he can bring the dead to life. With words he can cure an illness or cast out a demon. With words he can take condemned sinners like us and make us holy in the sight of God. He can take us, who by nature are headed to hell, and with a word make us citizens of heaven. He can take prisoners of guilt and shame and set them free.

“Jesus breaks the darkness with his actions”—that was the first part of the sermon today. This last part is “Jesus breaks the darkness with his words”. Really, they’re one in the same, aren’t they? Jesus takes action by speaking words. Remember how he healed Peter’s mother in law of a fever? Luke tells us that when Jesus did that he “rebuked” the fever. He spoke to it—to a fever! He told it to be gone, and it was. Last week we heard about Jesus talking to a demon, commanding it to come out of someone. And it did. When Jesus speaks, action follows.

That’s why Jesus went away from the crowd who sought his help, why he went away from them to preach. He wasn’t stopping his action, he was continuing it, through words. He was going to beat down the power of the devil, break the darkness of sin by announcing the kingdom of God. God was breaking into the world, defeating death, releasing prisoners. He was doing that through the words of Jesus.

I said that we don’t have a press corps following us. Jesus does. Want to see them? Look around you! We are here, ready to listen to Jesus, because we are convinced that when he talks—even if it’s through words written in a book or spoken by a man—when he talks, things happen. For us.

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again.
We know the darkness that Job felt. Jesus knows it, too. And he broke it.

We don’t usually get to see it in the dramatic way that the people around him did. We don’t see people miraculously rising up out of bed. But Jesus is still in the business of breaking darkness, even today. He’s doing it with his almighty power. He’s doing it by using words—the words about him and the promises he makes and keeps.

The darkness that you feel sometimes, the darkness that seems like it will swallow you up? It won’t. Not if Jesus has anything to say about it. And he does. Amen.