

At Fever Pitch
January 14, 2018
Mark 1:29-45
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/sermon01-14-2018.mp3>*

I was maybe 14 or 15 years old. My dad was out of town. I heard a noise of something crashing to the floor in my parents' bedroom, and my mother was yelling. I rushed in, and there she was, flailing in bed, yelling incoherently about things that were not happening to people who were not in the room.

I was scared to death. My mother was, I learned later, delirious with fever. Her body temperature was so high that she was literally out of her mind. She was unable to think or speak clearly because of the magnitude of the infection that had developed within her.

That's what a fever does, right? Your body senses an illness or a disease, and as the immune system kicks in, the internal thermostat goes up. This not only helps the white blood cells, but it limits the ability of germ cells to reproduce. A fever is not usually a disease in and of itself, but rather a symptom of something else that is going on. For that reason, most doctors today are reluctant to advise fever reducers until they know what caused the fever in the first place.

As we return to our study on the Gospel of Mark, I note that fever figures prominently in our reading for today. The passage at hand is, essentially, a description of a single day in the life of Jesus and his followers early in his Galilean ministry.

The group has had a busy day at the synagogue, the center at which the local Jewish community gathered for teaching, worship, and sharing life together. The usual service of preaching had been interrupted by an exorcism, which complicated things in

all sorts of ways. I can only hope for Jesus' sake that it wasn't a playoff weekend, because I'm sure it didn't make church any shorter that day.

They got back to home base, which in this case was the compound where Simon and his family lived. I'm sure that they were hoping for a little bit of lunch and some R&R (and, if it *was* a playoff weekend, maybe they'd catch the second half...). But there's a problem. The hostess is ill.



¹Our narrative is pretty straightforward. When Jesus learns of the situation, he cures her of her disease, the fever abates, and life gets back to normal. At face value, it's the simple story of a miraculous healing – just another day at the office for the Son of Man.

If we dig deeper, though, we see a little more meaning here. Jesus not only heals a person... he heals a woman. And he not only heals her, but in doing so he *touches her*. He broke the laws of purity by approaching a sick woman, and did so again by touching her, and compounded that by allowing her to prepare him a meal. It is unheard of for a religious leader to act in this way.

And, don't you know, word gets out, and it gets out fast. By the time the dishes had been done and before the post-game show ended, folks were coming out of the woodwork to meet this man. Mark tells us that the whole city was camped out on Peter's front porch. The fever of illness may have left Peter's mother-in-law, but messianic fever – the desire for a messiah, or a savior – is growing throughout Galilee. Jesus and his friends are up half the night healing the neighbors and casting out their demons.

As people all around him are caught up with fever, what

¹ *Christ Healing Peter's Mother-in-Law*, Rembrandt (c. 1650-1660)

does Jesus do? He takes a step back, he reflects, and he seeks to center himself in prayer. While everyone else is still sleeping, Jesus gets up early and finds somewhere to be alone, where he literally steps away from the feverishness that surrounds him.

Saint Jerome was one of the early scholars of the Christian church, and is best known today as the man who translated the Bible into Latin. We call that work the *Vulgate*. Around the year 400, Jerome was in the church in Bethlehem and he preached on this passage, where he noted the fact that not all the fevers of this life are manifestations of physical illness. He said,

O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers. But let us ask the apostles to call upon Jesus to come to us and touch our hand, for if he touches our hand, at once the fever flees.²

The wise man recognized that when Jesus went out to spend time with his Father, he was doing exactly the same thing that he had done with Simon's mother-in-law: he was seeking the Divine touch in a world that had become frenzied and ill-at-ease.

Just think with me for a moment now about your own life. What is it in your world that really has you going right now? Where have you experienced feverishness? You may not be my mom, laying in bed unable to speak in complete sentences, but is there a part of your life that has been affected by anxiety, or fear, or a sense of disorientation?

Where is that coming from? What causes the fever in our lives? Do you think you know? Are you sure?

² *Corpus Christianorum*, LXXVIII, 468

My sense is that sometimes, in our spiritual lives as well as in our physical bodies, we tend to blame the symptom (the fever) as the source of our dis-ease, rather than the root cause itself.

For instance, when the preacher asks you to think about the stuff that sets you off, isn't it tempting to erupt? "Of course I'm a mess! I'm all bent out of shape because he's an idiot!... she's out of control! Bills! Jobs! Family conflict! That's what's making me sick right now, Pastor..."

Maybe.

But is it possible – even remotely – that a part of our dis-ease or dis-comfort with life right now comes from an even deeper place: namely, that *we* are not in control? All of these things are happening around us or even to us, and it seems as though *there is nothing we can do to stop it...?*

What would happen if we took a page out of Jesus' book and sought to ask God to help us deal with our core fears and anxieties so that external triggers such as those would not matter so much?

In your body, if you get a fever and take an anti-inflammatory, there's a good chance that the fever will diminish. Yay! But there's also a pretty good likelihood that the source of the infection will remain or even strengthen (boo!).

If I am upset and unable to function the way that I think I should because I am not in control, one way to make me feel better is to manipulate the situation to my liking. If you do what I want, I'll feel better. If she stops being a jerk, I'm fine.

Except the infection of pride, or fear, or insecurity is still there. You may have managed to take the edge off my feverishness by placating me somehow, but my inner reality has not changed at all.



³The hope of the Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and recorded by Mark is that Christ came to free us not only from the discomfort that our fears and anxiety cause us, but from those root causes themselves. The gift of new life in Christ allows us to effect a fundamental change in the way that we experience the world around us.

Remember the first imperatives that Jesus gives in the Gospel of Mark: Repent (turn around!), Believe (open your hearts to a new way of being) and Follow (get in line behind me!). Sometimes we forget that a big part of following Jesus is, well, *following*. Embracing life in Christ is confessing that I am *not* the master of my own destiny and I am *not* the one setting the direction...

“Oh, great, Pastor. So now you’re saying that if only I would relax, and believe in Jesus, and somehow be a better Christian that everything will be just fine for me...”

No. Not at all. Our Gospel reading for today has shown us that Jesus calms a fever in Simon’s mother-in-law and that Jesus knows how to avoid a fever in seeking time with the Father. The remainder of the text illustrates that Jesus is also pretty good at inciting fever as well.

While he’s in the quiet place, deep in prayer, the disciples get up, grab a bagel, and form search parties to find Jesus. When they finally locate him, what do they say? “Everyone is looking for you! You’re a star! This is great!”

Why are the crowds looking for Jesus? Here’s a clue: it’s not because they want to hear another sermon. They want healing. They heard about what happened to the fever, and in the exorcism; they know about all their neighbors who have experienced new health and vitality, and they want Jesus to fix

³ *In The Wilderness*, Ron DiCianni

their problems now.

And look at how Jesus responds: “You’re absolutely right! People *do* need this! So let’s get cracking! Let’s leave this town – *and these crowds who are already looking for me* – and go to those other places and proclaim the Gospel. It’s why I came, after all.”

Jesus was gaining fame as a healer – but here he indicates that’s not his primary mission. He states his goal quite plainly: “Let us go somewhere else...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

So if you thought you heard me say that following Jesus means that all your fevers will disappear and life becomes nothing but sunshine, then my message hasn’t come through clearly.

Jesus didn’t make life easier for people! Jesus, time and time again, comes onto the scene and in preaching “Repent” and “Believe” and “Follow”, causes great disruption. He re-orientes the world. And again, it’s all there in scripture. Look at what happens by the end of the chapter: Galilee has become crazy town. The excitement there is at nothing less than a fever pitch – because the people knew that Jesus was a game changer. In a matter of days, in a society that knew nothing of social media or mass communication, Jesus was unable to show his face in public without being mobbed. It only got worse after he cured the leper – a man who, like Peter’s mother-in-law, a highly respected public teacher like Jesus had absolutely no business getting anywhere near, let alone actually touching. The presence of Jesus, oddly enough, made Galilee a more unpredictable place.

That is no less true in our own lives. If we are serious about following Jesus, then we hear his call at the core of our beings. We invite him to speak truth to the deepest places in our lives, and while I am here to say that he has the power to bring strength, and peace, and calm... we have to be ready for the fact

that he might expect us to leave our neighborhoods, touch a few lepers, confront some hostility, change our careers, evaluate our college majors, and use our time and money in a way that is not necessarily in line with what *we'd* choose if *we* were the leaders... *which we're not.*

Being a follower of Jesus will not make your life easier.

And I'll look at you, who have accepted the church's invitation to become deacons and elders, and say it again: being a member of or a leader in the church does not mean that your problems will go away. Sometimes, it means the exact opposite.

You might remember C.S. Lewis as a Christian author, the writer of such works as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Mere Christianity* or *The Screwtape Letters*. But before he wrote any of those things, he was an atheist. Yet in the context of his relationship with friends like J.R.R. Tolkien, he came to embrace Christianity. When reflecting on his conversion, he wrote,

Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness? While it lasts, the religion of worshipping oneself is the best.

I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and admiration from the earliest years, and is, more or less, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know. From the moral point of view, it is very difficult! I am not approaching the question from that angle. As you perhaps know, I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity.⁴

Lewis discovered what I have also learned: that while the life

⁴ *God in the Dock* (Eerdman's, 1970), pp. 58-59.

of discipleship can sometimes be challenging, it is also good. It puts us in the place where we can be who we were meant to be. And so, as our world is seemingly perpetually on edge about something or other, we can simply pray, “Come, Lord Jesus. Drive out our demons, our doubts, and those fevers that will distract or diminish us. Make us into who you want us to be. And make us feverish about following where you lead.” Thanks be to God, Amen.