

5 EPIPHANY B

February 5, 2012

All Saints' – Tupelo

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1.

Mark 1:29-39

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world. Fill our minds with your peace and our hearts with your love. Amen.

When Mark speaks of a disciple named Simon, it's the same Simon that Jesus renamed Peter. But the first part of today's Gospel is not about Peter. It's about Peter's mother-in-law who was suffering from a high fever.

And I wonder: What caused this high fever in the first place? A virus? Maybe something she ate? You know, I don't like to say it, but Jesus may have brought on that sickness and fever. Think about it. Jesus had come to town preaching and called Peter to follow him. In doing so, Jesus practically broke up this poor woman's family.

Think about it. Peter's mother-in-law was, first of all, a mother – the mother of Peter's wife. Her children were foremost in her heart. Simply put, she loved her children and wanted the best for them.

Earlier in her life, she likely had dreams of her daughter marrying a wealthy merchant and maybe having a fine home in the Jerusalem suburbs. Does that sound familiar? Don't *we* often have similar dreams for *our* children?

Well, the years pass and a rich merchant never shows up. Instead, Peter comes along and marries her daughter. Peter's a rough and tumble sort of guy. He has no ambition to be anything but a fisherman. He's not the one the mother would have chosen for her daughter, but the daughter marries Peter anyway.

After the marriage, the mother worries about the times Peter goes off with his friends for a few cups of wine. She worries that Peter barely makes a living as a fisherman, and all their lives depend on how many fish Peter could bring in. She worries also that he may drown in a storm on the sea. What would become of her little girl then? The mother worries, but she has no idea how bad things would get.

You see, one day something happens that makes her think that Peter has lost his ever-loving mind. Peter and his brother Andrew and a couple of other fishermen suddenly leave their boats and nets – they leave their whole business. And why? Why, to go off with that itinerant preacher named Jesus. And where are they going? Why, on a preaching tour, of course. The mother-in-law must have thought, "What a stupid and absurd thing to do. The fools! How could they think that Jesus could ever do anything for them?" Still, Peter had left with Jesus.

When Peter didn't come home on that first night, his wife was probably upset. Maybe she cried a bit. And Mother-in-law was left to comfort her and assure her that everything would be all right. In all this family uproar, the mother-in-law became sick and went to bed with a high fever.

As she lay ill, she suddenly hears Peter's voice. He's home, and he's coming to see her. Then she hears another voice and realizes that Peter has brought that trouble-making Jesus with him - the very last person she wanted to see. So we can imagine her groaning and turning to face the wall and hoping that Peter and Jesus will just stay outside. She doesn't feel like seeing anyone, especially that dumb Peter and his preacher friend.

Then, as she lies there, she senses someone standing by her bed. She turns and finds Jesus looking at her. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't ask about her illness or anything else. But, as Jesus looks at her, she can see the caring in his eyes. Then he simply takes her by the hand and gently begins to lift her up. And, as he lifts her, something happens. The fever is suddenly gone. She feels strong. All her anger and resentment disappear. Then she gets up and prepares a meal for all of them – including the strange but powerful man named Jesus.

Wow! What a story this is! But none of it is in the Gospel. I made it up myself. Still, as we look back over this story, can't we see something of ourselves in that mother-in-law?

For example, the mother loved her children and had dreams for their futures. We love our children and have dreams for them as well. But often our dreams don't come true. Things don't turn out the way we planned. Our kids don't grow up to be wealthy. They don't marry the mates we would have chosen. They disappoint us in a variety of other ways. And when things don't go as we wished – when our dreams are dashed – we find ourselves angry, frustrated, and worrying a lot - wishing things could be different.

Then just when things are going badly, something worse sometimes happens. Suddenly we may be faced with a new crisis – possibly a serious illness, a divorce, the death of a loved one, or we feel someone we love has betrayed us. We reach a point where we feel that the world is closing in on us. There seems little hope for a peaceful and meaningful future.

As our anxiety builds, we do things we would never normally do. Like the mother-in-law, we may even get sick. We may feel that about all that's left is try to escape

– like going to bed and pulling the cover over our heads, and turning away from everything. And, yes, like the mother-in-law, we may get sick – even run a fever.

But you see: It's precisely in our weakest moment, in our helplessness, in our pain and frustration that we need to remember Peter's mother-in-law, and what she did, and what happened to her.

First, she listened. She heard voices and one of those voices was Jesus. She didn't know Jesus, but she must have heard stories of his healing power. Even the faintest sound of his voice must have encouraged her. And when she began to see what Jesus was like, and when he touched her and lifted her up, she found new strength and hope.

So, yes indeed, we need to remember Peter's mother-in-law; because when we feel pain, when we feel weak and frustrated and helpless, when our dreams have been dashed: That's precisely the time when Jesus comes closest to us. That's when Jesus reaches out to save us from the time of trial.

And how does Jesus come? Well, maybe not in person as he did to Peter's mother-in-law. But Jesus does come. He comes in our worship, in our prayer, in the eyes and arms of a compassionate friend, in a warm hug, in the simple touch of someone who sees your pain- someone who will hold your hand and not leave you. Somehow, Jesus will find a way to come to you and bring you hope. And when you've had an encounter with the love of Jesus, you will feel new life flowing in you, and you will receive the strength needed to endure your trials.

At the end of the Gospel story, Peter's mother-in-law gets up and begins to serve them. And, it's reasonable to think that she also followed Jesus and shared in his ministry, serving Jesus by reaching out to others just as Jesus had reached out to her?

Well, that's how our own encounters with Jesus should also end. By his power, we're freed to get up and serve our Lord. We do that by proclaiming the Good News of Christ to everyone, telling others how Christ has made a difference in our lives, offering ourselves to others in their times of trial, taking the hands of our neighbors and lifting them up – giving them strength and courage and hope.

Peter's mother-in-law turned and looked at Jesus and allowed him to lift her out of her troubles. And wouldn't your pain and mine be made easier if we would give our hand to Jesus and trust him to lift us up? I think so.