

**Sermon Preached
By Doug King
February 16th, 2003
Mark 1:29-39**

Last week's New Yorker magazine had a cartoon of two priests of an indigenous religion, perhaps in Central America, climbing a tall set of steps to the top of a temple emblazoned with a ferocious face. One priest turns to the other and says, "A word to the wise. When the gods speak, they'd better say 'across-the-board tax cut.'"

There is a natural inclination by most of us who make our living in the God business to seek to place the most user-friendly face we can on God for our congregations. We have a desire to present an image of God that matches the needs of the people whom we serve.

Which brings us to this morning's text. You see there are two different ways for us to hear our text from Mark today. One way to hear the text is, how wonderful it is that Jesus is healing all of those people and making everything better as he busily goes from town to town. With this interpretation of the text a sermon could take the tac of how Jesus makes everything wonderful in our lives. Certainly not a bad way to go, and certainly a safe crowd-pleaser. But there is another way to read this text. Listen to one portion of the text for a second time. "That evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many with various diseases and cast out many demons..." Did you hear that? They brought to Jesus "all" who were sick or possessed, but he did not heal them all, he healed "many." Even in the midst of Jesus' miraculous presence, all is not made perfect in this broken world.

And Jesus does not even hang around to comfort and console those whose lives have not been healed. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." The disciples scamper around looking for

Jesus, anxious to bring him news of his celebrity and of how desperate the people in the town are for him to return to them.

But Jesus does not return to the town to hold their hands and try once more to heal those who were not healed the first time. In the gospel of Mark Jesus has a restless, relentless energy that is always pushing him ahead. He sets his eyes forward and he and the disciples leave behind the needy imploring crowds to continue their journey.

My friend Patrick puts it this way, "Mark tells us this strange story of the disciples telling Jesus, 'Everyone is searching for you,' and Jesus leaving, because Mark understands that Jesus is not at our disposal. Christian faith is not a religion machine where you put your money in the slot and out pops Jesus. Mark may not know how to tell us it works, but he knows it doesn't work like that."

We may not spend a lot of time Sunday mornings talking about it, but we know this is true. Jesus the Christ does not make everything wonderful in our lives. There are times when we pray for healing and the suffering continues. There are times when we pray for peace and violence continues to reign. There are times when we pray for answers and we continue to be mired in confusion. There are times when we pray for a sign of God's presence in our lives and we cannot shake the loneliness.

The life of faith is just not one warm fuzzy joyful moment after another. The life of faith is going out on each new day seeking the presence of God in our lives, even if yesterday we could find no sign at all. The life of faith is praying even when the prayers taste stale and dry in our mouths. The life of faith is knowing that there are times in our lives when we live in valleys of doubt. The life of faith is a nitty gritty bit of business. It can sing with joy, but it can also sigh with despair. It can illuminate our lives, but it can also leave us in the dark. It can lift us up, but it can also weigh us down.

Last Sunday night on the animated television show "The Simpsons," Homer, I hope you are all culturally astute enough to be familiar with Homer,

the loveable but obtuse father of the Simpson clan, well Homer notices that for some reason everything in his neighbor Ned Flanders' life including his greener grass is better than his is. Homer comes to the conclusion that the reason Ned's life is better is because Ned prays to God more. So Homer gets on the stick. He starts praying to God for everything, including finding the remote control for his television and a new tasty snack treat which turns out to be bacon covered in fudge. Whatever whim comes into Homer's mind he makes a demand upon God and expects immediate results. Oddly enough Homer gets everything he prays for and before long he is dancing in his underwear on the communion table of the church and drinking beer out of the communion chalice. In the midst of this madness, Homer's wife Marge makes this illuminating statement. "Homer, you cannot use God as your personal holy concierge."

Of course in the end Homer's so-called prayers are not answered as neatly as he would like and he does learn the hard lesson that God will not be placed at our beck and call. And heck the whole thing is wrapped up in 22 minutes. But it is one thing to watch a cartoon character's random whims go unanswered by God and quite another when our real life prayers of desperation appear to go unresponded to, as it seems for all the world that Jesus has left for another town and we will need to cope with the crises of life all on our own.

So where is the comfort? I suppose we could just hope that we are among those that Jesus does heal as he is passing through town. We could buy a lottery ticket of divine providence and take our chances. But I have to tell you I do not find that all too comforting when I lay awake in my bed late at night and worry about such things.

I believe the comfort is to be found in recognizing Jesus destination as he turns his face to journey out of town. The Gospel of Mark is a hurried race to the cross. Jesus cannot hang around forever holding our hands because he has some serious business scheduled. As much as Homer Simpson may want his remote control found, and on a far more serious note we may cry out for many elements of this broken world

to be immediately made right by our God, Jesus is on the way to transform the entire landscape of the universe with his loving sacrifice. This does not mean we stop praying for God's intervention in the world because we know neither how nor when God will intervene anywhere. This does not mean we do not sweat and bleed to bring healing to the world's broken-ness with our own efforts.

What this does mean is that the struggle and the pain and the darkness along the way will never overcome the promise of God's never-failing love through Jesus the Christ's journey to the cross and beyond. And in this action all the world's broken-ness will indeed be made whole in the end. Perhaps this is not as cozy a thought as God as our personal concierge, but thanks be to God that Jesus will not be deterred from his destination of love for the entire world. Amen.