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Epiphany 5B
Peace, Seattle
February 8, 2015
Mark 1:35-39

HEALED TO SERVE

In one episode after another Mark shows us how Jesus touches people where they are most vulnerable, and makes their broken lives whole again.

In these early chapters of his gospel, Mark doesn't replay for us the conversations Jesus had or the sermons he preached, instead Mark shows how Jesus was a man of action: he preached by doing. We see it again in today's gospel story.

Following on the heels of the exorcism experience in the Capernaum synagogue, a public healing in a public place; Jesus enters personal territory as he goes to Simon and Andrew's house with James and John, where, we learn, Simon mother-in-law is in bed with a fever.

In the space of two brief verses Mark tells of her healing. But let's allow our imaginations this morning to take us deeper into the story.

What kind of person was this woman, Simon Peter's mother by marriage?
By the time Mark's gospel took written form, no one could recall her name; let's call her Judith.

We all know the cultural typecast of a mother in law: she's the meddler—who hands out unsolicited advice, who criticizes incessantly, whose visits are more endured than enjoyed.

That's the stereotype. But what was Judith really like? What is her story?

From what Mark says we can deduce that she not only shares a roof with her daughter (also unnamed) and son-in-law, Simon Peter, but that her son-in-law's brother Andrew is also part of the household. Perhaps she's a widow without a son of her own who has found refuge with her son-in-law's family.

Whatever the case may be, when we meet her today it is Sabbath.
Jesus, this new fellow her son-is-law has been hanging around with, has just done something both frightening and wonderful—he's freed a man from an unclean spirit—and right in the synagogue to boot.

Judith didn't see this—no, she didn't make it to church that day; a fever kept her home in bed.

There is no time for illness, of course. There are responsibilities to tend to, food to prepare, people to serve. Mothers cannot fall ill. Yet, here she is, lying in bed and its nearly time for Sabbath meal. Gently her daughter wipes her brow with a cool cloth, mumbling a prayer to Adonai.

Judith hears their voices as they enter the other room, unusually animated it seems, which makes her curious. Several of them sound familiar—Peter & Andrew and their fishing buddies—but one is distinctly new. **Uf-da! Yet another mouth to feed!**

They're expecting a meal, of course—and her daughter is fully capable of serving it—but what is Judith going to do? As bad as she's feeling, she can't just lie there and do nothing!

Yet, this fever has a grip on her and there's nothing she can do about it.

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Everything seems to be falling apart, lately.

First, her son-in-law comes home with the news that he and brother Andrew are selling their boat.

Selling their boat!

TELL ME, HOW DO FISHERMEN CATCH FISH WITHOUT A BOAT? she asked him, incredulous. AND HOW DOES A FISHERMAN'S FAMILY BARTER FOR WHAT THEY NEED WHEN THERE ARE NO FISH TO BARTER WITH!?

He had no answers for her questions. He just stood there with a wild-eyed look on his face and the name of Jesus on his lips.

How, she wondered, would the family be provided for now?

Now that she thought about it, perhaps that's what started her fever: being worried sick over the future of her daughter and this family she found herself bound together with.

Judith felt the cool clothe on her face once more; then her daughter left her to welcome home her husband and his guests.

Judith heard her name mentioned in the other room. Simon Peter was telling them how she hadn't left her bed for days. She felt embarrassed, though there was nothing she could do.

Then, she heard her name pronounced by that voice she had not heard before, and the next thing she new, a stranger was standing at her door beside her daughter and son-in-law.

MOTHER, her daughter said, as she knelt and took her hand. THIS IS JESUS—THE ONE PETER HAS BEEN TALKING ABOUT. PETER SAW HIM DO MARVELOUS THINGS TODAY.

HE'S OFFERED TO HELP YOU. MAY HE? PLEASE SAY YES.

Judith saw the love and worry mingled in her daughter's eyes. Her eyes shifted to Jesus, standing calmly in the doorway.

So he's a healer, she thought. Well, she might as well find out if it were true.
Maybe her son-in-law wasn't totally off the beam.

Looking back to her daughter, she nodded her head.

Coming to the bedside, Jesus knelt down, and looked into Judith's eyes.
She could feel him taking her all in—her skepticism, her embarrassment, her fear, her hope.

Taking her fevered hand in his, he said, LET'S SEE IF WE CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF THIS BED.

AND THEN, HE STOOD UP. That's all he did; he just stood up, still holding her hand, and pulled her slowly first to a sitting position, then, with her feet on the floor, to standing.

Judith fully expected the dizziness to fill her head and send her reeling as it had every time she'd tried to get up the past week, but that's not what happened.

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Instead, as she stood there, with his arm around her shoulders to steady her, and his hand still holding hers, she felt strength pour into her, like a pitcher of cool water, filling her up on the inside from the souls of her feet to the top of her head—refreshing, invigorating, incredible.

They all stood there—silent in their wonder—as Jesus took his arm from her shoulders and let go of her hand. Judith looked to her daughter, to her son-in-law, to her healer.

Finally, the words came:

WELL, I'M FEELING A BIT BETTER NOW, she said, as matter of factly as if she'd told them to wipe their feet before they came in the house. The room exploded with laughter.

COME ON, NOW, she told them as she herded them out of her room and to the table.
THE FOOD IS GOING TO GET COLD. HAVE A SEAT. IT'S TIME TO EAT.
JESUS—WOULD YOU SAY GRACE?

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The pattern for our whole life of faith is contained here, in Mark's brief account of this healing.

Jesus comes into our lives, touches us where we are most vulnerable, and, lifting us, renews our lives like the wings of an eagle. And in response, we turn and serve. We simply serve.

Like Peter's mother in law, that's what we do, because that's who we are.
Servants of the Servant.

And this rising—whether from fever or from another sickness of body or soul—is, after all, only a dress rehearsal for what will one day be.

> Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
> but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
> they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,
> they shall walk and not faint.

Amen.