

Early on as a pastor, I came to the realization that very little in ministry is predictable. We often think we can plan and schedule our weeks neatly, but I quickly learned that ministry doesn't work like that. Sure, there are certain things I can count on: emails to answer, phone calls to make, meetings to attend, and let's not forget the inevitable air conditioning crisis. Yet amidst all the predictable tasks, there are elements that remain outside of my control—especially sermon writing.

For me, sermon writing often happens in drips and drops throughout the week. Sometimes inspiration comes in little bursts while doing something unrelated, and other times it's a slow process that unfolds piece by piece. But there are those wonderful moments when inspiration strikes early, perhaps on a Sunday evening or Monday morning. And when that happens—when you can get your sermon down, or at least outlined by Monday or Tuesday—it's a blessing. Ask any pastor, and they'll tell you: it doesn't matter what else the week throws at you, if your sermon is in place, it's going to be a good week.

This week was one of those weeks for me. As I sat with our texts for today, the words and ideas just started to flow, and I began to see a powerful connection between the healing stories in Mark's Gospel and our lives as followers of Jesus. So, let's dive into these stories together.

Our Gospel reading presents two distinct but connected stories. The first involves a Syrophenician woman who comes to Jesus in desperation. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and as any loving parent would, she seeks healing for her child. Now, if we think back to the preceding passages in Mark's Gospel, we remember that Jesus had just declared all food clean—a radical declaration that would have shaken the Jewish dietary laws to their core. But now, Jesus is making an even more radical statement: He's declaring all people clean.

At first glance, the interaction between Jesus and this woman seems tense, even uncomfortable. The woman is begging Jesus to heal her daughter, but instead of granting her request immediately, Jesus responds with a cryptic and somewhat off-putting statement: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is where understanding the cultural and linguistic context is key.

In the ancient world, calling someone a "dog"—in Greek, \*kuon\*—was an insult. It was a derogatory term used by Jews to refer to Gentiles, who were seen as outsiders to God's covenant. When Jesus refers to "the children," He's alluding to the Jewish people, God's chosen ones. His mission, at least initially, was to the Jews—to fulfill God's promises to Israel. But this woman, a Gentile, doesn't take offense. Instead, she responds with incredible faith and humility: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Her response is profound. She acknowledges the priority of the Jews in God's plan, but she also expresses her belief that God's mercy is so abundant, there's enough for everyone—even the Gentiles. In that moment, Jesus grants her request and heals her daughter. This encounter

signals something revolutionary: Jesus' mission is not only for the Jewish people but for all humanity. Salvation is not limited to the children of Israel; it is open to all, including us—Gentiles. And that's good news for us today because we too are included in this expansive vision of God's love and grace.

The second story in today's reading is about a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus heals him in a very physical and intimate way—putting His fingers in the man's ears, spitting, and touching his tongue. It's a powerful scene of healing, but as with the first story, there's more going on here than just a miraculous cure.

To fully understand the significance of this healing, we need to look at the language Mark uses. The word used to describe the man's speech impediment appears only twice in the entire Greek Bible: once here in Mark 7 and once in Isaiah 35:6. In Isaiah, the word is used in a passage that describes God's ultimate plan for the world—the eschatological vision of creation redeemed and restored. Isaiah speaks of a time when the deaf will hear, the blind will see, and the mute will shout for joy. This is a vision of God's Kingdom coming in fullness, where all things are made right.

By healing this man, Jesus is doing more than restoring his hearing and speech; He's making a theological statement. He's announcing that the time Isaiah spoke of is now. Jesus is the embodiment of God's eschatological plan—He is the one through whom all things will be made new. And by healing this Gentile man, Jesus once again demonstrates that God's salvation is for all people, not just a select few.

It's impossible to read these stories of healing and miss how they connect to God's larger plan of salvation. Jesus' actions are not random acts of kindness; they are part of God's unfolding plan to bring healing and wholeness to the entire world. But here's where I think we sometimes struggle. We read these stories of miraculous healings and see how God was at work in the past, but do we see God's agency in our lives today?

Do we view our lives and our ministry—both as a congregation and as individuals—as part of God's eschatological plan? Or do we see them as disconnected from the grand story of salvation? I would argue the former. Though none of us live perfect lives, our baptisms have invited us into a new way of life, one that points others to the good news of Jesus Christ. We don't have to be perfect; none of the disciples were. But through our baptisms, we are called into a life that reveals God's love and grace to the world.

Chances are, someone did that for you. Perhaps you came to faith through the influence of a parent, a friend, or a pastor. Maybe you were in a time of turbulence or seeking healing, and someone pointed you toward Jesus. The point is, God works through people, and God's plan for salvation is unfolding in and through us, even today.

Last week, I mentioned how sermons can act like a surgeon's scalpel—cutting away what is unhealthy and revealing what is true. Continuing with the medical metaphor, through our baptisms, we are called to be healers. We are called to shine the light of God's love in a world that is broken and hurting.

But our baptisms are not just about healing others; they are also about new beginnings. Just as the Syrophenician woman's daughter was freed from the demon, and just as the deaf man was given hearing and speech, so too are we given new life in Christ. Every baptism is a moment of

new creation. Every time we take communion, every time we serve others, love, show compassion, or give of ourselves, we are living into God's plan for creation. And that is no small thing!

When we see life in this light, it changes the way we live. It shifts the focus away from ourselves and places it on God—exactly what these stories of healing are really about. And even though it's not about us, we are still invited to be part of God's plan. Sometimes it's easy to see God at work in our lives, and other times it feels difficult or nearly impossible. But even in those moments when we don't see clearly, God is still working.

God is always about new beginnings. Every day, we rise and die to sin. Every week, we come to church, confess our sins, hear God's Word, receive God's grace in the bread and wine, and are sent out into the world—where we inevitably sin again, and then return to start the process over. But every time, we are given a new beginning.

In Revelation 21, we hear about the new heaven and the new earth, where God says, "I make all things new." This promise is not just for the future; it is happening here and now. God is constantly working in our lives, creating new opportunities for healing, reconciliation, and transformation.

It may sound cliché, but it's like that old saying, "God doesn't make junk." While it's not directly from Scripture, the truth behind it is clear: God doesn't make mistakes. God heals all, and God's salvation is for all. As Christians, we are healed not just for our own sake, but so that we can be agents of healing in the world. We are called to build bridges, mend relationships, and put God first in all we say and do.

So today, go forth knowing that God is constantly working in your life, and that He is continually creating a new creation in you—not only for your sake but for the sake of others. Know that because you are healed, you are set loose in this world to proclaim the radical and inclusive message of love and grace found in the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ.

Amen.