**Faith on the Move**

**Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1: 29-39**

In our reading from Mark today we are still only in our first chapter of this Gospel and already some of us are beginning to ask, where are my nitro-glycerin pills? If you are too young to know about nitro pills, they are tiny little white pills that help open blood vessels improving blood flow to the heart. Mostly they are taken by people who have heart issues. By the time my uncle hit his 60s he was taking nitro pills all the time. He was a dairy farmer and as a younger man he was strong and vital, but a life time of consuming red meat, whole milk, cheese and cream caught up with him. It took patience going for a walk with my uncle, because he had become so slow. He would pop a nitro pill to give him a little 5 – 10 minute boost and then pop another.

 As far as I know my heart is OK, but all the same, following Jesus in the first chapter of Mark, makes me feel out of breath, like I should be digging in my Uncle’s medicine cabinet for some of those pills in hopes they might help me catch up. Younger people, of course, are more likely to grab one of those high energy caffeine drinks that are both popular and dangerous if you drink too much, like Red Bull or Monster Energy. It’s tough to keep up with Jesus.

 Here’s what one commentator says about the Jesus we encounter in Mark’s Gospel, “Mark moves through the material at the opening of his Gospel with the speed of one who is afraid to let anyone think that they can know Jesus only by a quick preview. Fueled by his favorite words, “immediate and at once”, Mark races you through a day in the life of Jesus as a reporter might race a candidate through a day of political appearances.” It is enough to make us want to say, “slow down Jesus, we need to catch our breath. At least give us time to run over to Super America and get one of those energy drinks, or get out our nitro-pills, we can’t keep up with this pace”.

 We need to be honest; many of us already feel that we are living at a pace that often leaves us out of breath. This is especially true for folks with young children. You get up in the morning and your day is laid out for you from beginning to end. Get everyone fed, up and out of the house, off to school, the day care or wherever they need to be. It is then either off to work or on to various errands that need doing. In between you try and stay on top of commitments you have made, including perhaps a ministry team or two at Cherokee Park United. Late afternoon and evening bring an assortment of activities, squeezed in with homework and hopefully a meal in there somewhere.

 But, it’s not only parents with children that keep a full schedule and a rather constant pace, so too do many of our retired or near retirement folks. We have a congregation of active, committed people, who I know some times feel tired from the marathon of engagements that fill their days. Now along comes Jesus, who seems to be saying, “come on folks pick up the pace” and we are left gasping for breath, wanting nothing more than a chance to just sit down and rest. It makes me wish I was out for a slow paced walk with my Uncle Lloyd.

 But, is this really what Jesus is asking and expecting of those who would be disciples? Does Jesus want us to add more things to our to-do list, sign up for committees, get ourselves on more email lists so that we can respond with promptness to the latest pressing need? Is that what Jesus is expecting? How do we keep up with Jesus? Do we want to keep us with Jesus?

 One of the first things we notice in Mark’s Gospel is that that the urgency of Jesus stems directly from the mission with which he has been charged by God. As you know, Mark takes no time to tell us about Jesus birth, like Matthew or Luke. We first encounter Jesus as he steps into the waters of baptism with John the Baptist. Mark tells us as Jesus steps out of those waters, “the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove from heaven.” What an image, the heavens are ripped open, which is immediately followed by confrontation after confrontation after confrontation, with all the forces in this world that diminish us as human beings and keep us from living into the fullness of life God intends. The struggle for Jesus is with demonic forces that keep us from having life.

What if keeping up with Jesus has nothing to do with adding to our do list and the business of our lives and everything to do with the type of lives we are leading. What if Jesus is not asking us to do more, but rather simply join Jesus where we are in the struggle against all those forces that diminish our lives and our world?

Our Gospel lesson today is a prime example of what it means to follow this on the move Jesus who recognizes the urgency of his living.

Jesus no doubt knows what he wants to do with his day. Yet, when Jesus discovers Simon Peter’s Mother-in-law is ill, Jesus immediately responds. There are no to do lists or prior commitments that take precedent over responding to the human need directly in front of him. Jesus takes her by the hand, lifts her up and the fever is gone. If Jesus is busy looking at his watch, checking email on his I-phone, looking down the road to what is next, rather than being fully present in the moment, there would be no healing. But, Jesus is open. Jesus is present. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is sometime considered the first deacon of the church because she understands the caring that Jesus reveals. Mark tells us she began to serve those who were there, not because she is a woman and it is what women do, but because she understands, the Way of Jesus compassion. It is a level of caring that confronts and challenges systems and values that are unable to recognize and respond to human need.

This is why Mark tells us Jesus cast out many demons. What are those demons today that must be cast out for human beings to experience compassion and care? What are the demons that try and force their way into our families, saying to our children or our spouse or sibling you don’t really matter? What are those demons in our churches our communities that diminish us as human beings? Where do we give priority to beliefs over people, procedure over care for one another? What are those demons in our economic system, our educational system, our judicial system that keep people down?

Maybe following Jesus has less to do with adding yet one more thing to our do list and everything to do with our willingness to engage the demonic forces that diminish life by being fully present to those challenges and struggles the spirit of God calls us to engage.

 Jesus is on the move, but being on the move for Jesus has nothing to do with living a frenetic life, where one never is able to catch your breath, constantly stressed out because there is way more to get done than you will ever have the time to accomplish. In the midst of all the healing, in the midst of casting out demons of injustice, despair and hopelessness, Mark tells us Jesus slips away to a deserted place for prayer. For Jesus there is absolutely no contradiction between the urgency of his calling and the necessity of giving time for the renewal and guidance he receives in spending time with the God.

 If you have seen the movie Selma, this biographical story of the march Martin Luther King Jr. helped organize from Selma to Birmingham. In the movie, Martin Luther King Jr. is crossing a bridge, heading straight toward a militia of heavily armed police, who the day before had brutally beaten a number of marchers. As they approach the troops, King pauses and drops to his knees in prayer, as do all of those who are marching with him. There he remains until suddenly and without speaking gets up, turns around and walks back through the crowd, ending their effort that day to confront the police.

 It took as much courage, more courage, for King to return back as it did for him to go forward. But, by taking time for prayer, by opening his heart and spirit to a will greater than his own, King knew what he needed to do. For Jesus prayer is a resource in the confrontation he invites us to engage with all the demons that diminish us as individuals and as a people.

 Jesus is on the move. The people in Simon Peter’s home town, including the disciples would have loved it if Jesus had set up residency right then and there. They wanted him to stay put, which, of course is what the church has all too often wanted of Jesus. We prefer a Jesus that will conform to our expectations and quit moving around. But, Jesus has no intention of founding a new religion and nowhere is that more evident than in this passage from Mark. When the disciples finally find Jesus they say to him, “everyone is searching for you.” Come on back to where you were. And Jesus responds, let us go on to the neighboring town, so I may proclaim the message there also. Jesus has been moving on to neighboring towns ever since, proclaiming a full inclusion for women, a full inclusion for people of every race and color, a full inclusion for children, a full inclusion of our seniors, a full inclusion of LGBT brothers and sisters, a full inclusion of men who feel they have lost their way and are unsure of their place, a full inclusion of those who are excluded from an exploitive economic system, a full inclusion of those with disabilities, a full inclusion of creation, a full inclusion of Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist brothers and sisters. We try to get Jesus to settle down, to stay in one place, but Jesus just keeps moving on to the next town. It is hardly surprising a bunch of moderate clergy in Birmingham wrote a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. while he was still in jail, imploring Dr. King to slow down. It can be tough keeping up with Jesus.

 I am glad we have a church home at Cherokee Park United. I am glad we are part of the United Church of Christ and Presbyterian Church USA, but we become followers of Jesus, not by joining a religion, but by joining a movement dedicated, as Jesus is dedicated to fighting, resisting and challenging all those demonic forces that stand in opposition to the love and justice of God.

 Jesus is on the move. Our faith is on the move. Maybe you are still feeling a need for a nitro pill or perhaps a red bull in order to keep up with Jesus. But, the prophet Isaiah offers us a much better alternative, one that most certainly was the source of strength and energy for Jesus. Here’s what Isaiah says about our God, “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.”

**Isaiah 40:21-31**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah reminds us of what has been evident from the very beginning of creation, the God of justice and love is the source of our strength and the one in whom we find our renewal.*

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 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.

**Mark 1: 29-39**

***Our Gospel lesson today tells the story of Jesus on the move from the Synagogue to the house of Simon and Andrew where he offers healing to Simon’s mother-in-law. Everyone would prefer that Jesus would stay and continue his healing right where he is. But, Jesus is not only on the move again, but invites the disciples to join him.***

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.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 who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.