

Mark 1:29-39

Epiphany 5B + February 4, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Foretaste

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:32-34: "That evening at sundown they brought to Him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Far, far away in a developing nation, a little girl sits on her bed. It's a thin, narrow mattress on a creaky bedspring, but it is a mattress and it's off the floor. It's one of dozens in the big sleeping bay. The girl is an orphan, and life in the orphanage is all she's ever known.

Today, though, everything changes. She's called to the director's office, and she's told that she's going to be adopted by a couple from a faraway nation. She sees a picture of them, and she's told that they'll be coming to visit in a few months' time, as soon as the laws of both governments allow. In the meantime, she starts receiving a letter now and then; and when they have time, the staff interpreter reads them to her. She finds out bits and pieces about her adopting parents, where they're from and the sorts of things they like to do. Every note has a little bit more information, and it always has the theme that they are anxious, so anxious to meet her, that they will be there as soon as they can.

Finally, the red tape ends, and her future parents arrive to visit for a week. They bring her gifts, a little fleece hoodie and a pair of real shoes. They bring her exotic delicacies, like Snickers bars and Fritos. They don't have much room in their luggage, but in little ways the girl gets a preview of what awaits. They've brought a little bit of her future life with them.

For hours that week, the parents meet with officials and fill out more forms; and near the end of that week, they greet the girl with even bigger smiles. They tell her that they've done everything necessary for the adoption: the laws have all been kept and the payments have all been made. Now, they just have to wait for approvals from various government entities. That means more waiting: they have to fly home without her for a while, but they'll be back. The papers are signed. It's a done deal.

On the last day before they leave, they have permission to take her outside the orphanage. They go to different tourist sites in the city, stopping for food here and there. Wherever they go, people want to touch the girl. They want to touch her for luck: she was an orphan in a poor nation, but she is about to start a new life in America. Indeed, for the week her new parents have been there, it's as if she's halfway home.

Her parents fly back, and the waiting begins. A disagreement flares up between the two nations, and all adoptions are suspended for the time being. But never a week goes by without another letter and a picture or two. This is our house. This is your room. This is the view out your window. This is our church. This is our dog. Snapshot by snapshot, she gets a better idea of where she will be, and she can hardly wait to get there.

There's a bittersweet element to the waiting: even though a daughter with parents and a home, she's still living the life of an orphan, one child among many in the facility. Every day seems longer because of the happiness that is to come. In the meantime, her shoes get lost and someone steals her last two Snickers bars. Sometimes, it's easy to wonder if it was just a dream, or if it isn't going to happen after all. But she still has the hoodie, even if the elbows are worn through; and the letters keep coming. It's only a matter of time.

In truth, her behavior changes a little. She used to sneak around a bit and get into mischief; but she doesn't anymore. She would hate to have her parents arrive and find her misbehaving; or worse, she has this recurring fear that her parents arrive while she's hidden off somewhere so that they can't find her and maybe leave again without her.

Finally, *finally*, all is approved. Her parents – *her* parents – return, this time with an extra, little pink suitcase. They pack her few possessions, they help her say her goodbyes. They take her to the airport and that sleek, enormous airplane. Forty-eight hours later, it is just as it was promised: she's standing in her room, looking out her window with her dog standing next to her, grinning from ear to ear. All that she waited for has come, and she's not an orphan anymore.

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This fast-fleeting season of Epiphany proclaims the joy that Jesus has come into this world to save. If we're to use the story of the girl I've just told, His public ministry that the gospels proclaim is the parents' first visit to the orphanage.

The fall into sin by Adam and Eve effectively orphaned all from God, even as it poisoned all of creation; and part of the curse of sin is the veil that convinces people that it's far better to live apart from God than with Him, that it's better to struggle against death and devil without God's strength and grace. It's unwise and far from ideal, but it's all sinners know apart from God's Word.

It is not God's will that anyone be lost; so from the fall into sin, through the centuries that followed, He kept calling people to faith and kept promising that, in due time, He would come and redeem them. He would come and do all that was necessary to make them His people forever; and because He always keeps His Word, His promise made it as good as done.

So His people watched and waited, trusting in that Word; and in the fullness of time, Christ was born of Mary. He was born to do the work of redemption by His life, His death and His resurrection. As He went about His work of redemption, His labors repeatedly involved two things: preaching and miracles. Once again in Mark 1 (and remember, we're still in only the *first* chapter of Mark as Jesus sets the stage for all that follows), we have Jesus performing miracles. This is immediately after last week's reading, where Jesus shows His authority by casting out a man's unclean spirit, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath. He goes from there to Simon's house, where He finds Simon's mother-in-law stricken with a high fever. He takes her hand, and the fever flees. Let that sink in: with all the technology and advancements of the human race over the centuries, we're still stuck with a flu epidemic. Wash your hands, wear a mask, don't touch your face, and hope for the best, because this strain is rather nasty and contagious. But Jesus? When He touches the woman, *she catches His health*.

As soon as the sun goes down, the Sabbath ends and it's legal to labor again, people respond in faith to Jesus' teaching with good works. Trusting that He has authority and mercy, they bring everybody in need of healing. The Great Physician doesn't have a narrow specialty: He heals all sorts of diseases and casts out all sorts of demons. Again, it's not even close. He doesn't break a sweat. Evil is no match for Him at all.

Early in the morning, He's gone – gone to a desolate place to pray. Capernaum is not going to run out of sick people, and a healer like this could make a nice living for a long, long time. Simon and his fellow searchers find Him and summon Him back, but Jesus says that it's time to move on: "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." He goes on through Galilee, preaching salvation and casting out demons.

Wherever He goes and people believe, He never stays long enough for them, I'm sure. Wherever He goes and people don't believe, He can't be gone soon enough for their liking. So it goes for the next three years, preaching and miracles, one town and the next. Finally, Jerusalem at Passover, where those who want Jesus dead prevail. He's crucified, buried and gone: well, until the third day. Then He's back, risen from the dead. He appears for another forty days, then ascends into heaven.

So Jesus departs to His Father's right hand. The One who worked all those miracles, cast out demons and even conquered death is no longer in view.

But He has promised, "I am coming soon."

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Some will question that promise, or at least the meaning of "soon": it has, after all, been two thousand years since the promise was made. Only forty years after Jesus' ascension, Christians were already impatient for His return in glory, so much so that St. Peter wrote, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:8-9). You? You belong to the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church that's been waiting now for two thousand years. That's long enough, but you also know that time stretches out and becomes much longer under two circumstances. First, if you're in pain or troubled, the clock slows down. Second, if you're waiting for something wonderful to happen, the second-hand takes forever to get around the dial. For both reasons, for the people of God awaiting Jesus' return, this long two thousand years has been a *long* two thousand years.

But the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise, and He certainly isn't held up by the bureaucracies of governments or missteps of the Church. He waits so that more might hear and be saved; and He will not return until all of His people are gathered in. So the wait continues.

The biggest temptation for Christians is to give up hope, to think that salvation is just a fairy tale, to think that Jesus is never coming back and so life in this orphaned world is all that there is; and if this world is all that there is, then you might as well give up on what the Bible says and just go and do whatever you want to do. Devil, world and your own sinful flesh will argue against hope every day.

But the Lord keeps His Word, so I would happily remind you of this.

First off, the adoption is done. In the time of His visitation known as His public ministry, Jesus did all that was necessary to redeem you, so that you might be a holy child of God. This involved His perfect life. It culminated in His death on the cross, for your sins. It continued at His resurrection, where He defeated the grave on your behalf, so that heaven might be your home forever.

The law has been kept and the payment has been made.

The adoption has also taken place. It happened at the font when you were baptized. There, you received the adoption as sons. There, God the Father in heaven became your Father, and you were made His child in Christ. Now that you're adopted, as you wait His return, He keeps you in His Word; and in that Word, He keeps giving you tidbits about heaven, foreshadowings of what awaits you. In fact, every miracle that Jesus performs is part of that. Yes, He performs miracles to prove that He's the Messiah; and yes, He performs miracles to demonstrate that He has authority to forgive sins. But He also performs these wonders to give you a foretaste of heaven, like adopting parents bringing a few little gifts to a girl on a trip before they can take her home. In this world, His miracles seem pretty spectacular because they don't happen apart from Him. In heaven, they are a little thing compared to the glory revealed there: and every disease, affliction, fever, disability, wound and sin are gone at the resurrection.

Remember, the kingdom of heaven is where the King is. As Jesus goes about His public ministry on the way to the cross, He brings a little bit of heaven with Him wherever He goes. True, you weren't around to see Him work the wonders with your own eyes; but you're part of the body of Christ, the Church, one with brothers and sisters who did see these things and testified about them for you. You walk by faith, not by sight; but the Lord's promises are far more sure than what your eyes see.

You're already adopted. The Lord keeps reminding you in His Word.

And then, of course, He keeps working a miracle. Up on that altar, He delivers His body and blood, in, with and under bread and wine. There, He forgives your sins. There, He strengthens and preserves you in the one truth faith. There, He maintains the hope. He is coming back, and He is coming soon. Until then, He doesn't just send a reminder. He visits Himself. He gives Himself to you. It is why the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the feast to come.

He is coming back. Don't run off. Don't misbehave: don't be found hiding from God in persistent sin. Repent and live in hope and joy. You're adopted. You're a holy child of God. Those miracles in Mark 1 are just the beginning for you; because Jesus is coming back and His kingdom is yours.

Yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen