

The On-Demand Savior
Mark 1:29-39
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Kory Wilcoxson

The onset of the Computer Age has brought us a whole new vocabulary, hasn't it? Many of us can remember the days when spam was a tasty mystery meat, a hard drive meant a trip through the mountains while it was snowing, and an eye pad was what you wore when you had a scratched cornea. We've had to relearn our language in order to be able to speak the jargon in this technology-saturated age.

Take the word "viral," for instance. It used to be that if something were viral, nobody wanted to get anywhere near it. Now, if a video is labeled "viral," that means it has become an Internet sensation and is being viewed by millions of people. If you've watched the video of the comedian doing "The Evolution of Dance" or the kid in the backseat trying to talk after a trip to the dentist, you've seen a video that went viral and became an Internet sensation. This is related to what author Malcolm Gladwell calls the "tipping point." It's the moment when an idea, a product or an event reaches critical mass, boils over in popularity and begins to spread like a virus.

In our passage from Mark's gospel today, Jesus has gone viral. What started as an obscure ministry in a backwater town has suddenly reached the tipping point, and as Mark says in v. 28, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." To use today's terms, Jesus' website is getting a lot of hits. From this point forward in Mark's gospel, no matter how much Jesus tries to keep himself a secret, people are going to know about him, and that's going to create some serious issues.

But before he can go viral, Jesus is going to have to deal with a virus – a real one! As it turns out, while visiting Simon Peter and Andrew's house, Jesus learns Peter's mother-in-law has come down with a fever, probably caused by malaria. As soon as Jesus hears about this, he goes to the woman and heals her. He doesn't call the doctor, doesn't consult a committee. Jesus is someone who gets stuff done, and that's the kind of reputation he's starting to build.

That's Mark's gospel for you. Everything happens fast. From v. 28 to v. 31, we have the phrases "at once," "immediately" and "as soon as." This is one of those occasions when I actually prefer the King James translation. While our version of v. 29 says, "as soon as they left the synagogue," good old King James says, "and forthwith, when they were come out of the synagogue." Forthwith! I love that. "Mom, when will dinner be ready?" "Forthwith!"

The problem is that people began to expect things from Jesus forthwith. The scene after the healing of Peter's mother-in-law describes how the whole town of Capernaum descended upon the house, bringing all the sick and diseased and demon-possessed for Jesus to heal. The word is getting around. Jesus has gone viral, and everybody wants a piece of what he has to offer.

Even when he tries to pull away for some alone time with God, Jesus can't find any peace. Mark tells us that early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went to a deserted place to pray. When they realize he's gone, the disciples go on a manhunt for the missing miracle worker and when they find him, they exclaim with exasperation, "What are you doing here? Don't you know everyone is looking for you?" I don't think that's what Jesus meant we he said, "Follow me." But the crowd that gathered the night before has returned,

probably bigger and with more needs, and the expectation is that Jesus will return forthwith and continue healing people. After all, that's what he came to do, right?

Instead, Jesus pulls an about-face. Rather than return to Capernaum he announces to the disciples that they are packing up and moving on. On the surface that's a curious choice, because there was obviously plenty to do right there in Capernaum. Jesus could have set up shop, opened his own healing-related theme park, and lived out his days dealing with diverticulitis and dropsy and dementia.

But, as Jesus says, that's not his mission. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came here to do." Is that a bit disappointing to you? It is to me. There are still all kinds of need around him, and yet Jesus chooses to leave that place and go somewhere else. I have a problem with that. That's not how the folks in Capernaum wanted him to act. That's not how I want him to act.

I remember when I was young I'd visit my dad on weekends, and in my room at his house I had an old black-and-white TV with the bunny ears and the tin foil. This TV – bear with me, all you youngsters – actually had dials on it that you had to turn from channel to channel, and if you wanted a UHF station, you had to tune that dial just right in order to pick it up. Channel-41 WDRB in Louisville always carried the Reds games, so I spent a lot of Friday nights turning dials, maneuvering bunny ears and standing in various yoga-like positions in order to get a signal so I could watch the game.

Boy, times have changed, haven't they? Now we have about a zillion channels with all kinds of choices in shows, from the lowest-of-the-lowbrow to "Hillbilly Handfishin'," and if you don't like what's on any of those channels, you can call up any one of hundreds of movies or shows that you can start watching instantly. We have whatever we want right at our fingertips.

The problem is that this type of On-Demand service spills over into our spiritual life, and if we're not careful we start to expect an On-Demand Savior, one who we think will sit around and wait for us to need him, then respond forthwith to what one pastor called our SOP Prayers – Solve Our Problems. In our On-Demand world, Jesus becomes for us a spiritual ATM, dispensing what we think we need when we think we need it, and fading into the background the rest of the time.

I think that's why Jesus chose to leave Capernaum rather than stick around. Jesus had a larger, more important mission than just healing people; his message was that the kingdom of God was at hand, and he had to make sure everyone heard it. His primary goal was to proclaim the kingdom of God, and nothing was doing to distract him from that. In fact, the only times that he paused from that mission was to spend time in prayer, or at least to try before someone found him.

What does that mean for us as we seek to live out our mission as followers of Jesus? It says to me that we need to make sure we're connecting with God on a regular basis, not just in times of need. Biblical scholar William Barclay said, "For one prayer that goes up to God in days of prosperity, ten thousand go up in times of adversity." We tend to be driven to our knees in prayer by our crises and times of need. But we draw strength for God through our daily, regular interactions. If we cultivate our prayer life and our relationship with God when we don't need it, we'll be more open to God's leading and presence when we do need it. If even Jesus had to stop and pray on a regular basis in order to recharge his batteries and reconnect with God and God's mission for him, it stands to reason we probably need to do that ourselves.

The other thing this story tells me is that we're wasting our time if we are trying to pin Jesus down. A lot of folks want to claim some sort of exclusive rights to Jesus, to speak for him

on political or social or religious issues, to put him in a box and only take him out when they need him. But like the Allman Brothers sang, Jesus is a “Ramblin’ Man.” He’s always on the move. He refused to be domesticated or to be categorized. Some people want to stuff him like Lenin and put him on display and say, “See? We’ve got him. We know what he is really like,” but no one knows. We have no more control over Jesus than we do the wind. Just when you think you have him, he’s gone.

But he leaves something behind, doesn’t he? What did he leave behind in Capernaum? A mother-in-law who went from feverish and bed-ridden to faithful servant. A group of people who went from diseased and infirm to whole and hopeful. That’s how Jesus works. He touches, he heals, he saves, and those of us who are changed are left behind to tell the story of what happened. The only way I can show you Jesus is to tell you about what he’s done in my life. I can’t produce a picture or a signature, but I can produce a changed life and a renewed sense of hope.

So often we come to Jesus because we want something from him. “Everybody is looking for you!” Maybe that’s why you are here today. But let’s go back again to our wise old friend King James, who, if you’ll pardon the lack of inclusive language, translates the verse where Jesus is discovered like this: “And when they had found him, they said unto him, ‘All men seek for thee.’”

All people are seeking Jesus. They are not looking for a certain style of worship or small-group experience. They are looking for Jesus. The other stuff might get them there, but you can’t be dazzled and amazed into having faith. In this world where so much is going bad, people want to hear good news. And don’t we have some good news to offer them? We have a hospitable smile, we have an open table, we have a community that bears witness to Jesus’ healing presence. We have a story.

Let us commit to telling that story through our worship and our work. Let us follow Jesus’ example to be intentional about seeking time with God, turning our dials and tuning into our relationship with God. I believe if we ask Jesus to be with us all the time, during the good times and the bad times, we’ll find that when we really need him most – forthwith! - he’s already there with us, he’s been there all along. And when we realize that, we can then share that good news with those who come looking, because we are the evidence that Jesus still lives and moves among us. “All men seek for thee.” Look around. Do you see him? I do.