**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 7, 2021**

**Text—Mark 1:29-39**

It happens pretty much every time there’s some kind of big national tragedy or challenge that we have to face. It happened with 9/11 back in 2001, and it happened to an extent when the coronavirus pandemic started last year. Whenever something bad like that happens, people tend to get more religious all of a sudden. I remember right after 9/11, people were flocking to churches and other places of worship. Sanctuaries were filled to bursting, with people eager to hear some kind of encouraging word from God to help them deal with their sadness and fear. With this pandemic, of course, filling sanctuaries wasn’t really an option, but people found other ways to get more religious. Online worship and Bible study opportunities exploded, with huge numbers of people taking advantage of that. Before the pandemic started, we probably averaged less than twenty views of our online services every week, but as soon as we had to stop in-person worship, we jumped up to several hundred. And even after we’ve resumed our services, we still get quite a bit more traffic on our YouTube channel than we used to. Tragedies and other difficult experiences have that effect on people: they make people think more about spirituality and about the weightier matters of life. People can’t find answers in the places they normally look, so they turn to God for help. Whenever something bad happens, it seems like everyone is looking for God. And in the case of Christians, it seems like everyone is looking for Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning provides us with a much older example of people seeking Jesus during difficult times. Right before the events recounted in this text, Jesus had just gone into the synagogue in Capernaum and cast a demon out of a man who had been possessed. From the synagogue, he then went to Simon and Andrew’s house, where Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever immediately left her. Word of these miracle healings soon got out, and people from all around Capernaum began bringing the sick and demon-possessed to the house. Jesus healed all of them, demonstrating to everyone that he had the power of God and could cure people of whatever ailed them. The next day, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and went to a desolate place, where he spent some time praying to his Father. Then Simon and the others went and found Jesus, telling him, “Everyone is looking for you.” They certainly were. The people of Capernaum had seen what Jesus had been able to do for the sick, and they wanted more of the same. They wanted Jesus to keep healing people, to keep casting out demons, and to keep demonstrating his divine powers. Everyone was looking for Jesus, because they were having a tough time, and they thought he could do something to help them.

We have to ask ourselves: would those people still have been looking for Jesus if they didn’t need anything from him? What if they hadn’t been sick, or hadn’t been demon-possessed? What if they all had been basically healthy, wealthy, and happy? Would they still have wanted to see Jesus then? Or did they only look for him when they needed a miracle? I’m sure some of them would have sought him regardless, because they recognized that he was a great prophet and wanted to listen to his teachings. But others probably would not have. There was a situation that is recounted in John 6 that showed how people often did look for Jesus simply for material gain. Right after Jesus fed the five thousand, he crossed the Sea of Galilee, and the crowds eventually followed him to the other side. But instead of being happy that the people were looking for him, Jesus was upset. He said that they were only looking for him because they had eaten their fill of bread and wanted more, when they should have been looking for the bread of life, which was his flesh that would give them eternal life. Many in the crowds balked when they heard Jesus say these things, and they left him. It was all well and good when they needed material stuff from Jesus, but as soon as he told them they should be focusing on more important things, they decided he wasn’t worth listening to. We’ll never know if the same was true of the people of Capernaum in today’s text, but I’d wager that at least some of them were like that. They were looking for Jesus when they had material needs that he could meet, but as soon as that was done, they most likely would have lost interest and wandered off. Everyone was looking for Jesus that day, but would they still be looking for him when things were going better?

We can see the same dynamic in our lives as well. Think about it: when do we really feel the need to have an encouraging word from God? Is it when things are going well, when we’re healthy, wealthy, and happy? Or is it when things are not going so well, when we’re sick, or a loved one is sick, or we’re struggling financially, or we’re having trouble with our marriage? Sure, we want God’s help in those situations, but what about when our lives are actually going pretty well? Do we still look for Jesus then? Unfortunately, realistically speaking, we will not perceive as much of a need for God in our lives when we feel like we’re doing all right. When things are good, we feel like we’ve got a good handle on life, and we can deal with everything just fine on our own, thank you very much. When the shock of a tragedy fades, or when things start looking up, we become less and less aware of our dependence on God. We saw this happen in our society after 9/11, didn’t we? How long did that increased church attendance last? Maybe a few weeks or months? And then it was back to the same old thing.

And what about now, with this pandemic? How long did the increased religious feeling last? My perception is that once the initial shock wore off, people settled into a routine and got used to the new normal. Those who had always attended church kept on doing what they were doing, but most of those who got interested because of the difficult circumstances eventually lost interest. And this pandemic has been an ongoing problem, so for many people, there’s still been a heightened sense of needing God’s help, but hey, now there’s a vaccine! The magic bullet has finally arrived! The early returns on it have been promising, so maybe that means that things finally will go back to normal soon. Maybe we can take the masks off. Maybe we can stop all the social distancing. Maybe we can get back to whatever our routines were before the pandemic hit. And when we go back to those old routines and we feel good about things again, does that mean we won’t be looking for Jesus anymore? When we don’t feel as much of a need for comfort and encouragement, will we be as interested in seeking him out? Will we still acknowledge and worship Jesus as our Lord, or will we get distracted by other pursuits?

I hope and pray that we do not allow improving circumstances to make us believe that we don’t need God anymore. That would certainly be a mistake, for a couple of different reasons. First of all, the very fact that things appear to be getting better, that progress is being made, is due to God’s gracious provision for us. He has protected us during this pandemic, and he has preserved our lives. None of us would have survived if he had not been faithful to guard us from danger and evil. The vaccine itself is a gift from him as well; yes, it was made by scientists, but God guided them to make the breakthroughs they needed. We should never think that we only need God when it seems like things are out of human control; God works through people just as much as he works through anything else. Often he does his greatest works through seemingly mundane means. Exhibit A: the Sacraments. It doesn’t have to be “miraculous” to be the work of God. So if we think that God only does his part when people can’t get a handle on things themselves, we are sadly mistaken. God is always at work, and every blessing that we have ultimately comes from him.

But the main reason why we should never think that we don’t need to look for Jesus anymore is because we still are afflicted with the greatest disease of all. It’s not COVID-19, nor is it any other disease you will find in a medical textbook. It is the disease of sin, the original sin that we inherited from our parents. This is a disease that kills everyone, a virus whose end result is always death. No scientist will ever find a vaccine or a cure for sin; it is incurable by ordinary human means. And it infects everyone. No one is exempt from it. Try as we might, we cannot escape from the virus of sin on our own. No mask or social distance is enough to prevent us from catching it. If we ever want to be cured of this disease, we don’t need a doctor: we need a Savior.

And that is precisely why we should always be looking for Jesus in all circumstances: because he is that Savior whom we desperately need. Viruses and pandemics come and go on their own, but sin will always be a problem for us, unless we are rescued from it by our Lord Jesus Christ. It is he, the very Son of God, who came to earth as a human being, and lived a life free from sin, a life we could have never lived. It is he, the spotless Lamb of God, who shed his blood on the cross as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of the Father and atone for our sin. And it is he, the king of all creation, who rose again from the dead on the third day to conquer death for us and give eternal life to all who trust in him. He has promised us that by faith in his atoning sacrifice and glorious resurrection, we might be cured of the disease of sin and have its stain removed from us. He continues to cure our sin every time we come to this place to be absolved in his name and to receive his body and blood for our forgiveness. We will never stop needing what Jesus provides for us, so we should never stop looking for him wherever he is present. He has promised that he will be present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, so we ought to come to this place every opportunity we get and receive his gifts for us. He has the cure for the greatest disease that we human beings could never hope to overcome. We would be foolish to throw that cure away just because we think we’re doing fine now. On our own, we will never be doing fine, but with the salvation that Jesus brings, we will find the solution to every single one of our problems.

The world may only look for Jesus when things are going poorly, but we Christians will look for Jesus in all circumstances, no matter what may be happening at any given point. We will look to him for comfort and assurance when times are tough, and we will look to him with thanksgiving and praise when things are going well. Above all, in every single situation in life, we will look to him for those greatest gifts that we cannot get anywhere else: forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the kingdom of God. We will not wait until the next national tragedy, or the next pandemic, or the next personal struggle to fix our eyes on Jesus, but we will do so without ceasing. He is always our Savior from sin and death, and so we should always look to him for every good gift that he offers us. We don’t just need him when we’re feeling down; we need him at all times, and thankfully, he has made himself available to us at all times. The ministry of Word and Sacrament will continue until the day that Jesus comes again, and so we will always be able to seek him where he has promised to be. Look for him, then, where he meets us, and receive that assurance that he is your God who loves you and has mercy on you in good times, bad times, and everywhere in between. Amen.