

**“Why Christ Came”**  
**Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Cor 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39**  
**A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**at Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA**  
**February 5, 2012**

*Once upon a time* is the name of a new TV show I kind of like. It takes place in the fictitious town of Storybrooke, Maine – a seemingly ordinary town full of cafes and corner stores . . . a courthouse, hospital, school. It seems quite normal. But that is only because the inhabitants of the town are under a curse. They have been frozen in time and space, and have forgotten who they really are. *Really* they are Rumpelstiltskin, Red Riding Hood, Aladdin, Geppetto. In flashbacks you learn their stories – stories of heartbreak and ecstasy and valor – all set amidst the dark woods and majestic castles of the land now cloaked with a curse – a land of magic and mystery, a land of fairies and dragons. All hidden . . . all forgotten.

Until Emma Swan comes to town. Emma is the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming; she was spirited away before the Evil Queen’s curse came into effect. She has come to Storybrooke – why? To be with Henry, the son she gave up for adoption ten years before. Why *really*? According to Henry, Emma has come to save the town and all the people in it, to lift the curse, to remind the people who they are and what they are about.

Today’s story from Mark has an other-worldly quality to it, even in this colloquial translation. Imagine Jesus in Simon’s home by the sea, the woman sick with fever, her bed at the back of the house. Jesus took her by the hand, the story goes, and he raised her up. The fever left her; it fled Jesus, like the wild pigs will do in a little while, like the demons always do. Then the crowds come: the sick and demon-possessed. Did I say other-worldly? We don’t think much about demons anymore; they’ve been consigned to the TV shows and fairytales. When Mark speaks about the sick and demon-possessed, he means *everyone who is broken*, no matter how. And as I try to imagine them all (even with a 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset) the lines blur between ordinary and mythic. What ails the drug lord? The paralytic? The prostitute? What troubles the cancer patient? The alcoholic? The schizophrenic? Where do we start treating post-traumatic stress? Or depression? Or rage? There are all kinds of “broken” – only some of which you can treat with medicine. However people hurt . . . no matter what tormented them, they went to Jesus, and Jesus healed them.

Jesus wields unbelievable power, works instant cures, helps everyone who wants him. Finally, after they’ve all gone home, when it’s so late at night that it’s actually early in the morning, Jesus walks out the door (probably the same door the demons used); he goes into the darkness on his own. Jesus wants to be alone. He wants to pray. But the disciples track him down. They don’t just look for him; they *pursue* him. They want him to come back into town – to bask in the glory a bit! Jesus won’t do it. “Let’s go on to the neighboring towns,” he says, “so that I may proclaim the message there also, *for that is what I came out to do*. That’s how the good old New Revised Standard Version of the

Bible puts it. *That is what I came out to do.* You could almost take it to mean: that's why Jesus got up early, why he left the town limits that morning. I read a summary of this passage that said, "Jesus decides to take his ministry to Galilee," like, instead of back home to Nazareth, maybe, or instead of ordering a pizza. I don't know; it seemed too casual to me. He came out to enjoy the sunrise . . . . Somewhere else I read that there's a military nuance to the Greek word that's used for "come out": *Christ came out* like an army comes to meet the enemy (all those demonic forces). That's powerful to think about . . . . Yet I like the way this new translation emphasizes Christ's purpose, his reason for coming into the world. Here Jesus says, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. *That's why I've come.*"<sup>1</sup>

This is why Jesus came: to preach what is good . . . to oppose what is evil . . . to heal the cosmic brokenness, remind people who we really are, and show us what *we* are meant to do.

Twelve men are Jesus' first disciples, but (in Mark) a woman is the first to understand what he is really about . . . and goodness, I skipped right over her! Simon's mother-in-law, who'd been sick and feverish, experienced Christ's power to *raise her up* and make her whole. The fever left her, and she served them.

She served them. I confess, most of the years I have known this story, I have hated to think of that poor woman rising from her sickbed to serve – what? Supper? Drinks? Couldn't the men have fended for themselves *one evening* while she got over being so sick? Yet many scholars will tell you: this was probably for the woman a deeply satisfying thing. Her illness had robbed her of her status, her dignity, her ability to welcome guests into her home. In her culture, to offer hospitality like that was an important part of a full life. I expect it brought her joy.

What's more, as she serves, we see this woman fulfilling her purpose. Not only as a woman. Not only as a host or hostess. But as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The word Mark uses to speak of the woman's service is one we'll see again and again in the New Testament: *diakoneo*, to serve. Our word for "deacon" comes from *diakoneo*. *To serve* is as essential to Christian ministry as hospitality was to a first century woman. It takes the twelve disciples a while to learn *diakoneo*. They keep arguing about who is the greatest among them. Jesus sighs and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." (9:35) Of course, Jesus sets the example. "I did not come to be served [he says] but rather to serve and give [my] life to liberate many people" *Why did he come? Why really?* To serve. And by serving, to save.

There are two things I noticed about the *woman's* service in today's story. First of all, there was nothing flashy or even memorable about it; it was simply worked into the fabric of her life. She did what she could, where she was, to make others comfortable. And secondly, there's a pay-it-forward quality here. Angels are the first to serve in Mark's gospel. They take care of Jesus while he's in the wilderness, among the wild

---

<sup>1</sup> The Common English Bible. We distributed copies of the New Testament in this new translation at GPPC this Sunday.

animals, and being tempted by Satan. The angels serve Jesus. Jesus serves the sick and broken people around him. He serves this woman. The woman serves the disciples. The disciples are made ready to go with Jesus and (in some ways at least) to follow him. *To serve* is what Christ will ask them to do.

Some of you have heard about the little epiphany I had last week – thanks to my Epiphany Star, *Gratitude*. When I got that star a few weeks ago in worship, I thought of Meister Eckhart's old line that "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is 'thank you,' that would suffice." I resolved to notice the good stuff this year and to say thanks as often as possible. To feel gratitude. But then, last Wednesday morning, my husband and I woke our son Elijah by singing him Happy Birthday. (Happy Birthday, Elijah. I have to pay him royalties now that I've mentioned him in the sermon.) Anyway, Elijah woke up happy about the song, and the first words he said were, "Thank you!" I thought: what a nice way to start your second decade – feeling grateful! The more I thought about it, the more grateful *I* felt. I realized that I wanted to revise my resolution around the Epiphany Star of gratitude. Instead of feeling more grateful *myself*, I want to try doing more things that will help *other people* to feel grateful. Even small acts of service can mean a lot.

In the back of my mind, I'm sure, was a blog I'd read about an "outbreak of Idaho kindness." Someone had reported her experience of a stranger's kindness while shoveling snow. It was two-feet-high that morning. Hard to imagine in these parts. A young man had walked up, relieved this woman of her shovel, and spent the next 45 minutes clearing her sidewalk. It wasn't random, she realized later. The man left her in the same direction from which he'd come. He had approached her intending to help.

Same morning, another woman named Carol looked out at 2 feet of very wet, heavy snow in her driveway. She knew it wasn't going anywhere without some help. So she called a local excavator, Kurt, who moonlights in the winter plowing snow. She'd met him a couple of years earlier when he'd done some digging in her front yard to fix a broken waterline. He remembered her name, and they had a nice talk . . . but his minimum charge was more than she could pay. That night, when Carol got home her driveway had been plowed! At first she thought she and Kurt had misunderstood each other – that her "thank you" had meant he should go ahead and plow. But when she got inside, she found a voice mail from Kurt: "I was in the neighborhood this afternoon, so I went ahead and plowed your driveway . . . I don't expect you to pay me . . . just pay it forward to someone else who needs help sometime."

Another cold morning, Carol was stopped in traffic because of road construction. As she sat in her warm car, she watched one of the workers blow on her hands repeatedly to warm them. When the traffic started up again, Carol slowed to a stop by the woman and handed her gloves out the window. The woman smiled a great big smile as she put them on.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.raisingjane.org/journal/10688>

I wish I hadn't woken yesterday morning to the New York Times and its Quotation of the Day: "He was never warm in his entire life. Not once." That's what Juma Gul said about his one-month old son, who recently froze to death in a refugee camp in Kabul. His family had fled their home – part of a war zone, they say. (Plenty safe, the Afghan government says.) The Gul family and 35,000 other people have been huddled in tents and mud-huts in the middle of Kabul, without heat or electricity through the coldest, snowiest January in 20 years. They are living in a state of chronic emergency, without access to much of anything: health care, education, food, sanitation, water.<sup>3</sup> Talk about broken.

I mention this with sorrow, mindful of the vast need and brokenness in this world. But I feel also grateful for the people who, like Jesus, *take their service out* to neighboring lands – even faraway lands like Afghanistan, recognizing the need – the *universal need* – for help with healing. Not all of us go – not all of us *need* to go – but the Christians who *do* model Jesus' determination to meet people wherever they are. To take his service on the road. Our Witness Season is a time to hold such people into the light, and to serve and support them however we can – with prayer, with notes offering encouragement, with money (if we can) to fund their work of binding up wounds and casting out demons – demons of prejudice and poverty, disaster and despair – all kinds of demons, really. It's what they went to do . . . what we are meant to do, too, in some way.

Why did Jesus come? To earth, I mean. There are lots of ways to answer that question. He came to serve. To heal. To teach us about God. To fight what is evil and promote what is good. To save this town, this earth, and everyone in it. He came to remind us: we are meant to follow his example.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Driven Away by a War; Now Stalked by Winter's Cold, by Rod Nordland, February 3, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/world/asia/cold-weather-kills-children-in-afghan-refugee-camps.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/world/asia/cold-weather-kills-children-in-afghan-refugee-camps.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1)