

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 5, 2006

**Power, Fame, and the Kingdom of God**

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

There are some interesting parallels between our story today  
and our current environment here in Pittsburgh.

Our current environment is, of course, pre-Super Bowl, Steeler Mania.  
I had to resist the urge to give this sermon the title,  
"Jesus Mania" or "Jesus Fever".

From the "Go Steelers" signs on the city buses,  
to 99 out of 100 people wearing black and gold on Friday and Saturday,  
to the Steelers' chant being sung over the school intercoms;  
there were even black and gold ribbons I had to remove  
from today's chancel flower arrangements  
(sorry, but, that wasn't happening).

Steelers Mania makes Western Pennsylvania  
a really intense, and a really fun, place to live these days.

Even this Georgia boy has caught the fever.  
It all started when Mary Ellen and I were given tickets  
to the game against the Browns a few years back,  
when Cowher pulled Kordell Stewart in the 4<sup>th</sup> qtr,  
and replaced him with Tommy-gun Maddox  
who led the Steelers to an overtime victory.  
It was a miraculous moment – short lived career to follow –  
but a miraculous moment nonetheless.  
And from that day I was infected with the fever,  
converted to the black-and-gold gridiron religion,  
and Mary Ellen, too.

So much so, that two weeks ago, after the victory over the Broncs,  
which sealed the Steelers' miraculous comeback,  
Mary Ellen pulled out the pots and pans,  
gave them to the kids,  
and we went with them out to the front porch  
to scream and make noise,  
while our suburban neighbors shot off fireworks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Except for the live satellite broadcast, the city buses and fireworks,  
the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee was not too far different  
from our current state of affairs.

In the Gospel of Mark, the people of Galilee have Jesus Mania.  
He has come on the scene like first-round draft pick  
who is surpassing even the greatest expectations.

A new teacher with new ideas,  
and with such authority that even the unclean spirits obey him.

Just before our story today,

Jesus has gone to Capernaum, and taught in their synagogue.  
And while he is teaching a man comes into the synagogue  
with an unclean spirit.

And the unclean spirit cries out at Jesus  
and announces to everyone there  
that Jesus is the Holy One of God,  
come to destroy the demons.

Jesus orders the spirit to "be silent and come out" of the man,  
and the man is restored to his right mind.

At once, says Mark,

*Jesus' **fame** began to spread throughout the surrounding  
region of Galilee.*

Think of that as like the Steelers victory in Indianapolis.  
The mania builds as people anticipate the next miracle.

Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to the house of Simon and Andrew,  
where Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever.

He takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and the fever leaves her.

She is able to return her honored role as senior woman in the household,  
showing hospitality to her guests.

The word of this next miracle spreads like wildfire throughout the city.

They apparently didn't need 24 hour news coverage,  
with video clips that could be downloaded from the web,  
or satellite TV –

by word of mouth

everyone hears about Jesus and his miraculous power.

*So that evening, at sundown,*

*they brought all who were sick or possessed with demons.*

*And the whole city was gathered around the door.*

I think this was on the South Side of Capernaum,

and the local police had to park their camels in the way

to close down Carson Street.  
*And Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases,  
and cast out many demons.*

Miracles and the fame that goes with them are exhilarating.  
It's easy to catch the fever and be swept up in the mania.

\* \* \* \* \*

But Jesus' reaction to his new popularity is a bit puzzling,  
especially since he has every right to bask in the glory.  
Jesus doesn't do press conferences, endorsements, or sandwiches.  
Instead, he resists his growing fame.  
In fact, all throughout the gospel of Mark,  
he resists the euphoria surrounding him.  
Just as he ordered the unclean spirits to be silent in the synagogue,  
when they were proclaiming his identity,  
so he would not permit the demons in this story to speak.  
Why? ...*because they knew him.*

Unlike the prayer led by Coach Cowher in the Steelers locker room  
covered by the press  
(a prayer I downloaded from the internet  
and happen to think was a very good prayer!)  
Jesus found a way to withdraw to a deserted place to pray.  
His disciples had to hunt for him, and tried to convince him  
to stay in Capernaum and build upon his victories.  
But Jesus resists their plea  
and says he is ready to move on to neighboring towns,  
*to proclaim the message there also;  
for that, Jesus says, is what I came out to do.*  
Jesus seems more interested in his prophetic message –  
about the kingdom of God –  
than about his miracles which make him famous.  
And on the way out of town, in the next story, Jesus cleanses a leper  
and then, keeping with his pattern,  
*sternly warns him not to say anything to anyone.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Why all this secrecy?  
The gospel of Mark is well-known for this thread of the tradition  
called the "Messianic Secret."  
Jesus often commands the silence of those healed,

and of the demons who know his identity as the Son of God.

It seems that, for some important reason,  
Jesus doesn't want his identity as Son of God  
to be primarily associated with his miracle working.  
Being the Messiah is, for Jesus,  
about something more than impressive displays of power.

At first, this may seem to make little sense.  
Wouldn't the working of miracles lend more credibility to Jesus' teaching?  
Wouldn't fame help him spread his message to the world?  
It seems the more people he cured, the more converts he would have.

\* \* \* \* \*

Perhaps it's easier to understand if we bring this story into our own lives  
of faith and prayer and hope.

Think about this: If Jesus power is mainly about working miracles,  
what happens when you and I pray for miracles,  
or when the many others in gospel times prayed for miracles,  
and we are *not cured, not relieved,*  
*not immediately or ever healed of our suffering.*

Then we have to ask, "Is the Son of God, who has this power to help,  
who is all about working miracles of healing,  
just choosing not to help me?  
Am I not worthy of a miracle?"

If miracle-working power was the best kind of power Jesus had to offer,  
then we all are to be pitied.

But Jesus came to reveal a deeper power, a more profound power,  
the often hidden power of the kingdom of God.

The gospel is clear:

Jesus has come to bind the power of evil,  
to destroy the power of death,  
and to harness the power of life for our sake,  
*but not primarily by protecting us from pain and suffering..*

Jesus binds evil, destroys death, shines the light of life,  
not by winning the loud adulation of the crowd,  
but in the most hidden and paradoxical way:  
by suffering and dying for us  
and with us.

Certainly, we can expect that some believers  
will receive a miraculous cure  
    when they need it – we hear of many stories like this.  
        But even these are not cured forever,  
        and will suffer again and one day die.  
Some who suffer may not be physically cured,  
    but will be saved from isolation  
    as they are embraced and cared for by the community of faith  
    that goes out in Jesus' name.

And some will remain tormented by physical, social, spiritual affliction,  
    *but they can discover in their suffering,*  
    *that Christ is closer to them there than ever before.*

The primary power that Jesus reveals to the world,  
    and that the church proclaims in Jesus' name,  
    is power made perfect in weakness.  
The sword of affliction has passed through the flesh and blood of Christ,  
    so that when that sword pierces us,  
    Christ is carried on the point of that sword  
    into the deepest places of our woundedness.  
There is no suffering, no pain so deep in us  
    that Christ is unable to go there.<sup>i</sup>

Suffering and disease and illness in this life is inevitable.  
And all of us face the shadow of death.  
It is in suffering and death that Christ meets us  
    and works the greatest miracle,  
The Miracle of Love,  
    that draws us into the embrace of God's eternal life.  
This is the message Jesus came to proclaim:  
    God's love for us is unconquerable.  
    Love will overcome.

"Go Jesus!"

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<sup>i</sup> Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*.