

Whenever I go out in public in my clericals, people interrupt me for all sorts of reasons. Some want a blessing. Some want to ask a question. Some want to rant on and on about “religion.” On Halloween, some want to know if my clothes are a costume. Even though I can’t heal people just by letting them touch my jacket, I don’t mind the interruptions. Unexpected occurrences are often places where God is up to something. I remember well a saying that one of my mentors had: “The interruptions are the ministry.”

People interrupted Jesus all the time, more and more as his fame spread and his reputation grew. Most of his miracles seem to be spontaneous reactions to unfolding events rather than pre-planned public performances of power. Today’s Gospel is a wonderful example. Jesus is interrupted upon his return to the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee by a great crowd and a leader of the synagogue named Jairus.

Jairus’s position would have given him great prestige, a high social position, authority, respect, power. Yet, here he is, groveling at the feet of an obscure itinerant preacher and faith-healer. The only thing more dubious than Jesus’s origins were his followers, a small gang of coarse men and large crowds of poor rabble. Jairus abandoned his daughter in the last moments of her life to make an act that smacks more of desperation than of faith. He begged Jesus, repeatedly, to save his daughter’s life and restore her health.

Jesus went to Jairus’s home without a word. But on his way to respond to this interruption, Jesus is interrupted again. A woman with a hemorrhage that for twelve years has stubbornly refused to heal has also heard about Jesus. Like Jairus, she also seems to be out of options, and also shows a streak of reckless determination. She survived disease and “doctors,” pain and exhaustion, frustration and isolation. Her society would have considered her literally untouchable because of religious purity laws, but with the boldness of all those who refuse to be ignored or marginalized, she reaches out and lays a hand on Jesus.

These stories are combined for a reason. But the reason is not to answer the question of how we can receive answers to our prayers. We may phrase the question in the most disingenuous way, demanding to know why God doesn’t miraculously make things better — as we would define “better” — right now. For one thing, God’s perspective is radically different from ours.

Our experience, our point of view, is one of scarcity to be managed. Time, money, attention, even compassion, for *us*, are limited resources, requiring wise and careful stewardship. But from *God’s* perspective, there is abundance without limit. People laughed at Jesus when he said, “The child is not dead but sleeping,” but from his point of view, raising her from death was as simple as waking her from sleep. Though, if she was a teenager, waking her from sleep might have been the more difficult task.

And the story of Jesus being interrupted by the woman with the hemorrhage

reinforces the point. The dying girl would seem to be the higher priority, but when you aren't bound by the limitations of the physical universe, you don't need to triage your patients. So, while it looks like Jesus doesn't have his priorities straight, and his own disciples try to discourage him from stopping, he ignores them and engages with the woman as if he had all the time in the world, because he does.

But the real desire behind that question — of how we can get our prayers answered — is for us to get a handle on God, to take control of the terrifying mysteries of life and death that were never ours to control. And that's not St. Mark's point at all. Mark is leading us toward an answer to a much more important question: Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

Some of the details that Mark intended to help us get the right answer are lost on us. We likely miss the symbolism of crossing the lake to return from Gentile territory to the Jewish homeland, and Jesus working miracles in both places. We aren't shocked by a woman touching a strange man in public. We are ignorant of the details of the religious laws and customs that forbid contact with anyone with a hemorrhage or a dead body. We miss the symbolism of the number twelve, alluding to the full twelve tribes of Israel. But we can still find an answer to the big question right here.

First of all, the paired stories show us that Jesus is a gifted healer, greater than Old Testament miracle workers like Elijah. The stories clearly show that the power of healing resides in Jesus. He doesn't have to pray for intervention. Indeed, in the case of the woman in the crowd, we see that the power of healing is not just part of his will, it's part of his very being. These are the attributes of God alone, and since there can be only one God, somehow, Jesus must be divine. What others are saying about Jesus must be true. This man truly is the Son of God.

So if Jesus is the Son of God, what does this revelation tell us about God? Mark has answers here, too. Firstly, God is in charge of the whole universe, for God has dominion over both opposing forces, life and death. We see that from the two women in the story: one, obviously, dead, and one associated with blood, symbolic of life. The power of Jesus dramatically, permanently, qualitatively transforms both of them. Secondly, to God, these opposing forces are not equals. God is a God of life and healing, and not sickness and death.

It really astonishes me when people talk about terrible suffering and untimely death as if they were God's will for anyone. "Part of God's plan." "It was his time." "Death is a part of life." "Everything happens for a reason." No, no, no, and no! Here and throughout scripture we see that sickness and death are the enemies of God, and we see that they can never withstand an encounter with the divine. If this were otherwise, if the forces that corrupt creation were stronger than God, then God would hardly deserve our respect, much less our worship. If death were our eternal destiny, worship would be an idle exercise and the Gospels, a sick joke.

No. Our God is a great God, worthy of all worship and praise, and the source of

our only true hope. These healings foreshadow Jesus's own resurrection, which in turn foreshadows our own eternal life with God. I can imagine nothing greater. Yet, God's greatness does not mean haughtiness or distance. God is deeply loving and concerned, and moved by our suffering. God chose to be one of us and chooses to live right here with us. Our God is a God who welcomes us into closer relationship when we'd settle for an anonymous touch. Our God is a God who speaks life to all, who tells the desperate, "Do not fear, only believe."

Jesus wants us to have faith, but he knows that we won't get to where he is on our own. So Jesus interrupts an imperfect world to show us that we, too, can respond to human suffering with acts of astounding compassion, generosity, and love. Until he comes again, we do have to make hard decisions about limited resources. But today's Gospel shows us how we might start adopting God's point of view by making different choices.

Jesus shows us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven right here on Earth, interrupting our lives of fear and despair with bold action and meaningful hope. And Jesus challenges us by revealing that God is indeed concerned with the welfare of those suffering on the margins of society and willing to jump in to places society would call inappropriate or hopeless. We can interrupt the cycles of poverty and complacency that keep so many of our brothers and sisters suffering and marginalized. Jesus has made the first move. What's yours going to be?