

HEALED; MARK 1:29-39; FEBRUARY 8, 2009
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It is no small irony in this great treasure hunt of a life that when Jesus appears in today's story almost no one, except the unclean spirits, realize who he is. I say irony because the treasure we search for in life is life, abundant life which is what Jesus comes to offer.

We are in the opening lines of Mark's Gospel which we will be reading through November. Mark's story of Jesus is brief and masterfully assembled like a Hemingway short story with staccato lines and stark contrasts.

The plot is simple: Jesus' work in Galilee signals a new power loose in the world revealed in his healing countless poor of their maladies and diseases. All the while he proclaims the Kingdom of God which no one comprehends until Peter's confession of faith when it seems almost too late and they are only days away from his crucifixion and death.

To say that the disciples were obtuse is an understatement. They never realize their spiritual blindness until they meet him again after Easter. But until then, they are confident they know who he is, what he is up to, and even presume to direct him at times.

This is why those disciples are so annoying on the one hand and likeable on the other. They remind us of ourselves. Who can blame them for getting caught in the frenzy that surrounded him as he healed people considered in the grip of Satan?

Who can blame them for basking in the glory of his spreading fame? Others better than them may have realized sooner who he was, been more humble and reverent in his presence. But Jesus did not choose those others to be with him and to send into the world. And good for you and me he didn't because we are now those slow-to-get-it disciples he chooses.

I do not mean to offend anyone here today and if there are any spiritual giants in our midst, any Gandhis or Buddhas or Mohammeds, forgive me.

But given this morning's poignant opening to the account of Jesus' life I believe Mark would have us consider our own faltering, presumptuous disciple-like responses to the Son of God.

I love that line from Bob Dylan, "How was I to know you'd be the one, to show me I was blinded, to show me I was gone, to show me how weak was the foundation I was standing upon."

Ever since the Enlightenment the foundation the modern world has stood upon has suffered from a blinding hubris that could come only from the purported closing of the universe to God. What I am talking about is an inflating of the scientific method into a god that could explain, invent, or ultimately cure anything.

We post-moderns have deferred if not abdicated to this god to the extent that we permit no intrusions from any other sphere of reality; as if all realities have been discovered and mapped by the disciples of the religion of science.

And in the process of shrinking our expectations for holy intrusions into our lives to the merely explainable and verifiable we have shriveled the church and negated its relevance to a hurting world.

And we have disempowered the church, at least the mainline church, staggering now from four decades of declining membership.

Someone put it this way, “the church has lived so long as a permitted and even privileged minority...in a culture whose public vision is controlled by a totally different vision of reality, that is has almost lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision and therefore to modern Western civilization.”¹

But I am hopeful because the power that loosed the grip of the evil one on those whom Jesus heals in today’s story is the same power that can loose the grip of darkness masquerading as sophistication and science and reasonableness in our time.

It is a power no one controls – not the preacher, not the church, not the academics. It is a power that breaks into calcified lives and communities when the slightest crack in the façade of having-it-all-figured-out appears.

I wonder if there won’t be more cracks in the façades of our modern world. So much that we so recently hailed and relied upon seems to be teetering: nearly every system from government to education to health care to, most ironically, the economy—the late symbol of our power and mastery.

What will it take to humble us? What will it take to loose our grip on the god-like claims of those who have proposed that science has saved us from superstition, sanitized our religious beliefs and made of our spiritual habitation a clean and well lighted place?

We are no different really than those first followers of Jesus. They did not suffer from the Enlightenment presumptions that stunt our spirituality. But they did suffer from the same desire to control their lives and stake their claim to comfort and predictability and peace on their terms.

In the meantime Jesus remains steadfast in his mission. They go from Capernaum into the hill country surrounding Galilee today.

He heals and teaches and consorts with tax-collectors and prostitutes and stirs the ire and wrath of the religious establishment who can neither control nor understand him.

Yet, at no point does he turn his dense followers away but demonstrates remarkable patience with them. When you’d think their blindness would crush his heart and spirit he keeps them close and continues speaking to them the words of life.

As skittish and skeptical as we are about holy intrusions in our lives Jesus was rather sanguine about God’s over arching purpose and willingness to intervene in human affairs.

How else do we account for his healing ministry and parables about owners of vineyards and lands who make their wealth and prosperity available to those previously considered outsiders? Not to mention the Resurrection—the final blow against and defeat of death. If these things are nothing more than the result of human efforts, good and true to be sure, nevertheless what ever is left of our faith and Jesus’ story offers little hope to a world well on its way to self destruction.

In fact, I think there is great hope. I believe we are in the midst of one of those great eras of change—not just in social and secular institutions but in the church.

The reverberations now going on look for all the world like another Reformation or Great Awakening. We are living in a time when the old forms of ecclesiastical life no longer serve or speak to the people and new forms are emerging.

It's hard to say what new shapes those emerging forms will take. But I am convinced we are on the cusp of some great transformational moment. As in any transformation what is old must give way to what is new. The other way to say it, as Jesus did, is that we must first die in order to live. Even the saints started out in darkness and death.

There is a great scene from G.K.Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* that speaks to this. The man who was Thursday stood there in the dark.

"I really have no experience," he began. "No one has any experience," said the other "of Armageddon." "But I am really unfit—" "You are willing, that is enough," said the unknown. "Well really," said Syme, "I don't know any profession of which mere willingness is the final test." "I do," said the other. "Martyrs. I am condemning you to death. Good day."

What we need to enter this new age, to participate in the transformation of Christ's church is simply willingness to let go of the limitations to which we have confined God and die to the lives we've carefully constructed around those limitations – deeply embedded in the culture of the mainline church, this church.

We finally saw "The Bucket List" at our house the other night. Not a great movie but an interesting plot with no small relevance to our contemporary, driven world.

Two men approaching the end of their lives are diagnosed with cancer and given six months to a year to live. One has been supremely successful, lived the American Dream and wants for nothing materially but seems almost incapable of intimacy and commitment.

The other has lived a good life but has deferred his dreams and the use of his talents in order to provide for his family and when the need for his bread-winning sacrifice no longer exists because his children have grown and gone, he discovers a profound emptiness.

What happens is they are both finally willing to let go of the past that defined them and the fears that insulated them and in the process they are transformed. When they are willing to recognize their old answers for life no longer work they undergo a kind of death but then they find they are no longer held back by those old answers.

The movie ends with the hardened skeptic billionaire actually preaching at his friend's memorial service saying that the last months of his friend's life were the best months of his—the billionaire's—entire life.

I think that's where we are now as a church, perhaps some individually; entering into a new life-giving awareness and dawning new age.

If Armageddon is a symbol for the toppled old order then there is an Armageddon coming. For our mainline church it will require letting go of the old answers of the

Enlightenment to our questions about God. I'm not suggesting we give up science. I am saying it's time to release ourselves from the pseudo-religion of science that strips our faith of wonder and awe and mystery. It's time to open ourselves to God's holy intrusions into his church, into our broken lives, into this misguided world.

My hunch is if we set aside our modern reservations to Jesus' miracles and healing and simply listen to the good news that God has entered the world to heal it through the work of his Son, that something new will begin happening at the core of Christ's church.

I can't argue you into this. I can only point and testify to it. I can only join John the Baptist, who began this Gospel a few verses before today's story pointing to the One who comes among us: God with us, God for us, leading us toward a new world we could not imagine or have without him. Amen.

ⁱ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003) 29.