

4th Sunday after the Epiphany
Sermon 2.1.15
Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

I'm reading Ari Shavit's book *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*. Shavit writes as a 3rd generation Israeli, the son and grandson of Zionists. He loves his home but recognizes it as tragic—tragic in that one long-ago well-meant move unfurled a series of actions and reactions; and these have been mind-bendingly destructive for so many people of so many sorts; and yet that original move might also have resulted in the continued existence, indeed the thriving, of a people once threatened with extinction; tragic in that there's no one really to blame for all that's "off the mark."

Now, there's a statement: "...a people once threatened with extinction..." And I don't mean the extinction part, though that is a lot to take in. I mean the "a people" part. Can it even be said that there's any such thing as "a people."

How fixed, how enduring, are the lines that help us sort and catalog human beings? What's a Jew—and what isn't one? What's a European—and what isn't one? What's a Palestinian, or are they all just Arabs? What about a Moroccan Sephardic Jewish immigrant now living in a society dominated by once-European Ashkenazi Jews? Is he black, African? Is he an immigrant, or more native than those 3rd generation Israelis yet making Hungarian food for dinner and listening to Bach's piano concertos in the evening? It's the edges of these groups that are fuzzy. It's the details that make the story a complex entanglement.

But now that we're at it, what about racial lines? Another book I just read is Nell Irwin Painter's *The History of White People*. In it, she tells the story of how white people came to be. And let's be clear, the book is social history not natural history since whiteness is a social construct not a natural one.

So, I recommend the book—both books, actually, but now I'm back to *My Promised Land*. I recommend the book—that is if you can handle tragedy yet without the catharsis that makes tragedy bearable. This is a tragedy that hasn't reached its catharsis, and might never; this is a tragedy that is yet playing out, might always be playing out.

Yes, I recommend the book—but only if you can handle ruminating on an issue that begs you to take sides yet without taking sides. Of course, trying evenly to consider all sides of this century-long, generations-deep unfurling is itself a stance that many will find offensive. So, this I say in warning: don't read this book for answers. Don't read this book if you mean to figure out who did what wrong, who did the most wrong, who started it, who will finally end it, and how? Don't read this book if you're looking for clarity, if you're looking to have your ideology confirmed as correct.

But to be clear, I wouldn't fault you if this is what you're looking for in life. I wouldn't blame you: after all, that urge is a strong one. I'll admit, before I started to read it (required as I am for my book club meeting this evening) I put it off, I stalled. The whole thing made me want to shout: "Just stop it! Just stop your fighting!" As if getting the boys to lay off their bickering, their mimetic rivalry, I could see both sides and I just couldn't stand the conflict anymore. "Don't trace it back. Don't tell me who did what. Just stop it; just start from zero, from here and now."

It works in regard to the boys, why not in regard to geo-politics...?

That's a rhetorical question; I'm being ironic.

To be correct; to have things cleared up, cleaned up: that urge is a strong one. This, in regard to the Middle East, that tiny strip of land whose name we can't even agree on; this in regard to life in general: the urge to clean lines, to clear moral standing, is a strong one.

I have to say, Jesus doesn't help in this regard.

There's a word left out in the rendering of this passage into English. It's probably left out because it doesn't make much apparent sense in this context. Plus, it's one of Mark's favorite words: it shows up a lot in his gospel. So maybe those at work on translating this from its original Greek figured that to drop one wouldn't do too much damage.

Euthys is the word, a drumbeat throughout this book. *Euthys* becomes in English "immediately," "suddenly," "at once," "just then." This passage, if *euthys* were included, would read: "They came to Capernaum; and suddenly when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught." And this is a little awkward,

right? It's a little strange. It seems to imply that the Sabbath came suddenly. But how could this be? The Sabbath comes when it comes, quite predictably, after six ordinary days.

Of course, when I first became a pastor, about a year in, a colleague asked me what I was finding to be the biggest challenge in the work. "How frequently Sunday morning comes," I told her. "It's like every three days." But I doubt that's what Mark was driving at here. I think what he meant to give word to was the effect of Jesus' presence in Capernaum, in the synagogue, on that Sabbath. It was sudden. It was immediate. There was no mistaking this for a regular Sabbath; something about this one was different. But what made the difference wasn't obvious, was mysterious.

One bible scholar has this to say of Mark: "This gospel doesn't devote energy toward establishing a clear Christology, an understanding of Jesus' nature." This is largely John's concern, and to a lesser degree Matthew's concern, but for Mark, Jesus is important as "the one uniquely authorized, commissioned, or empowered to institute the reign of God." In sum, Jesus *is* the reign of God. Whatever will be the felt experience of our ultimate end in the presence of God, whole recreated creatures amidst a whole recreated creation, perfected by God' presence and sustenance and redemption: whatever felt experience that will be is what Jesus brings when he walks into a room to everyone in that room.

I grope for an example here, and I find I can't find one. There's no equivalent. Think about it: when Jesus groped for an equivalent ("The kingdom of God is like when...") he had to tell a strange, slightly upsetting story in order for his hearers to enter into some likeness of a state with which no one has any full, conscious experience of.

But I can tell you this, which I've told you before: something is immediate if it has no medium for our then experience of it. Thinking literally, something is *immediate* if its not being mediated, which, in our age of so much that is mediated, is worth meditating on.

What in our lives comes to us without any sort of mediation?

What in your life is immediate, felt—viscerally felt, cellularly felt?

What answer you came up with comes close to the felt experience of Jesus that Mark means for us to take away from his gospel narrative.

And it's just this that made that Sabbath feel "sudden," and Jesus' entry into and teaching in the synagogue feel "sudden."

But it doesn't end there. Jesus as immediate, felt presence and experience isn't the point of Jesus among us: it's the mode or perhaps the evidence. The point of it all, though, is this:

When Jesus entered the synagogue, it would be better rendered that he occupied it or that he possessed it or made it busy, alive with his presence. And this explains why Jesus said to the spirit: "Be silent and come out of him." In contrast to the room being filled, busy, alive with the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, the unclean spirit is to be silent. In the same way, when the unclean spirit that occupied the man, convulsing him, now left him, it would better be rendered that the spirit un-occupied him, un-possessed him, became un-busy about him. Jesus coming near makes unclean spirits take flight. Jesus' approach spurs unclean spirits to retreat.

Consider: the unclean spirit asks Jesus, "What have you to do with us?" but it's an idiomatic phrase, hard to translate. Its rhetorical effect is this: "Why are you picking this fight? Why not just leave well enough alone?"

And it's a good question, if you ask me. After all, many are the times when I decide to leave well enough along. I actually regard this as a sign of my maturity, as a sign of my growing understanding that I can't fix everything and that, in many, perhaps most, cases, I shouldn't even try. I should just accept things as they are and try my best to respond in grace and pray deeply that the situation is well in God's hands—well and not just well enough.

But this is just it, in regard to Jesus. He's not merely one of us, he is also of God; and so leaving well enough alone is literally, and essentially, something he cannot do. Like oil and water, like soap and grease, Jesus cannot negotiate with what's unclean, he cannot compromise with what's evil. His presence means evil's taking flight. His occupying a space means evil's ceding, it's retreat.

This is why Jesus doesn't need to destroy the unclean spirit, as the unclean spirit suggests he means to, or assumes he will, do. "Why are you picking this fight?"

Have you come to destroy us?” And of course evil would assume destruction. Its own mode, evil would assume and assert this as the go-to mode for everyone and everything. No surprise then that Jesus doesn’t, that he hasn’t—hasn’t come to destroy this or anything. He merely sets evil to flight.

Remember a few weeks ago when I pointed out that Mark’s gospel is less concerned with sin and more about God’s creation having fallen into enemy hands? Remember when I implied then that Mark’s Christ is less about saving us from sin and more about freeing the creation for an enemy occupation? Do you remember? I do—because I’d never noticed that before, hadn’t even noticed it then, but had it pointed out to me by a lectionary podcast I listen to out of Luther Seminary in Minnesota. And it’s amazing to me that I missed it because it makes so much sense now seeing it.

These exorcism scenes make for tough preaching because they’re so wildly out of step with our modern context, and even a post-modern context for those who’ve already left the modern era behind. I mean, who believes in demon-possession anymore?

With this in mind, preachers have tried to cast this in language that speaks to us today. We might say, those said to be demon-possessed in the New Testament bear symptoms that resemble epilepsy or various mental illnesses. But, in doing so, we’re disposed to think either that the New Testament writers were quaint and erroneous because we have better ways of treating epilepsy, so the story and its significance dissolve to nothing. Or we diagnose a mental illness, which leaves those today struggling with illnesses that cause enough suffering as it is to wonder if perhaps they’ve got a demon, which adds yet another layer of dread and suffering.

But to understand Mark, and Mark’s Jesus, as understanding the world as having fallen into enemy hands is to understand these scenes of cleansing and demon-un-possession in a way that yet speaks. To understand Jesus as one who has come to a creation that has come to be occupied by an enemy presence is to open up a whole new way of relating to this Christ who is, yes, brother and friend, but also stranger and disturber of the peace.

And yes, it’s a peace that isn’t absolute. But it is functional, serviceable. It works for me. So, couldn’t he just leave well enough alone?

A least favorite notion from scripture is this one: that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a least favorite, but a most persistent. It shows up a lot, and it's tough to take. The one time I preached on it, a parishioner got up and left in the middle. And yet, here I go again, and because it's just this that I think is fearsome about the Lord—just this, that God is not here to endorse the world as it is, which we've managed for the most part to make function well for us, or at least well enough; that God doesn't come to us in order to inhabit and ordain the shelters that we've constructed for self-protection and self-preservation, even if (regrettably) not everyone can come in. No, God comes to call us out of these provisions; God comes to not to negotiate a better arrangement but to establish God's reign, which is absolute in goodness, absolute in grace.

And this is fearsome, because it means that our constructions and machinations will fall away; it means our that apparent control of ourselves and our circumstances is all appearance, is illusory and fleeting.

And knowing this is a fearsome thing. But it's also where wisdom begins. But here also implied in this, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: that this fear, though wisdom's beginning, is not where wisdom ends. The final insight of wisdom is not fear of the Lord, but faith in the Lord; not fear of the Lord but desire for the Lord. Yes, the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom, but its end is faith and hope and peace.

Somewhere in the middle is where we might be. Somewhere in the middle, between the world having come to be occupied by an enemy presence and the world as filled with the good and gracious spirit of God, is where we are.

Somewhere in the middle: you are here; we are here.

And let's be clear, this is no easy place—for we are not God and we are not Christ. We *do* negotiate with evil: we *do* compromise for a better way and we do settle for good enough.

We tack into headwinds, life a series of course-corrections. If Christ walks a straight path even across stormy waters, we tack into headwinds in the faith that by zigzag we'll reach our straight-ahead goal.

So, yes, I'm sorry to say, sometimes wisdom dictates that we leave well enough alone—for when we get into a stubborn mindset of no compromise, no negotiation, that's when we become uniquely dangerous.

There's hardly a more dangerous idea among humankind than the idea of purity.

There's hardly a more destructive notion than this one, which so often springs from godly faith, that we must be pure and so we must eradicate evil in our midst. The urge to rid the world of what's unclean has been, historically, I'd say the most destructive urge. And it's an urge that finds reason in religious faith—which is why people so easily assert that religion itself is evil, that religion does much more harm than good.

But this urge isn't essential to religion—it's essential perhaps to human beings and so finds expression and fuel in religious faith. But it isn't essential to religion itself.

On the contrary, I believe that the Christian faith read rightly testifies to something quite different: the promise that, in Christ, there is a time and there is a means by which the world will be free of that which seeks destruction; that we journey through life in the light of this promise to that time; and that meanwhile we pray for grace to act for the sake of the gospel, we pray for forgiveness for when we thwart the gospel, and most or all we pray for faith that God acts even when we fail to or we counter-act or we act out.

The good news today comes with a heaped helping of news quite a bit harder to take. But there is good news in it. And this is it: that though we might feel ourselves to be living in tragedy, to be enduring tragic circumstances through which we can hope only for good enough, something serviceable and provisional, this isn't the end of the story. The end is God's good and gracious end.

But there's more: that we don't have simply to wait for the end to experience God's good grace; that we don't merely have to endure occupation all the while promise dwells in some distant, unfelt future. No, for it's breaking even now, breaking in even here. Christ's coming to the world shows us what it looks like; Christ's coming reveals what will have us recognize it. When evil is put to flight

simply by presence, when destruction is silenced by an authoritative word spoken in fierce compassion, when love is lived: the end is now.

History unfurls, circumstances seem dire, then love speaks, love acts: and the end is now.

Thanks be to God.