

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 6.7.15

Scripture: Genesis 3:8-24

Mark 3:20-35

This is Jesus' mission statement: that's what's been said anyway. According to the gospel of Mark, this is Jesus' mission, this is why Jesus has come—to bind up the strong man that rules the world and then to plunder his household, which is to say the world.

It's a strange mission statement, we should feel free to say. Indeed, it's a strange mission. Of course, we know that Jesus is the good guy, is always the good guy. We know Jesus can be trusted. We know Jesus loves us (because the Bible tells us so). So we might hesitate to admit that we don't quite get it. We might demur in admitting that we actually have a problem with this.

Jesus came to bind, to plunder?

There's such force behind that, almost violent force. It's tough to take—certainly tougher than how I've imagined Jesus' effect in the world.

You might remember, as we started with this gospel this year, noting “Mark's” understanding of the problem that Jesus came to solve. The problem with the world that Jesus came as resolution to isn't sin and human wickedness, it's the world itself having fallen into enemy hands. This world, which God created and means to sustain, has fallen under an occupying force—the demonic (which is to say spirits other than holy), the diabolical (which is to say divisive), the satanic (which is to say adversarial or accusatory). Jesus has come to reconcile and make one all that's been divided, to offer peace to a world entangled with blame, and to unleash the Holy Spirit so that no other spirit will have free rein to gather and attract. Jesus has come to liberate this world fallen now under enemy rule, to liberate it back for God. And the way by which Jesus solves this problem is simply by his presence. His presence sets the enemy to flight. His presence sets the demonic into retreat.

I've been reading a book called *Unclean*, by Richard Beck. In it, he points out this thing, this most obvious thing. Exploring the human impulse of disgust, he points out that if, for example, you're sitting down in a lovely restaurant—The Old Inn on the Green, let's say, or Café Adam—and you have just ordered the soup of the day—a butternut squash soup, let's say, equal parts sweet and savory, a sort of dessert but that begins the meal, and made with all the freshest ingredients grown nearby—and you find in your soup a long, coarse strand of hair, then the whole soup has been

spoiled for you, and even perhaps the whole restaurant. And it was the Old Inn on the Green, for goodness' sake. It was Café Adam. It was the Wheatleigh!

But why should this be the case? Why would the disgusting presence of the hair have such a contagious effect on then the whole bowl of soup, on perhaps the whole restaurant? After all, hair isn't actually contaminating. There's nothing about hair that would make the soup suddenly toxic. Certainly there are things that, should we eat them, our lives would at risk. But hair isn't one of them.

What's more, why wouldn't it be the other way around? Why wouldn't the loveliness of the restaurant (undisputed, undeniable) and the deliciousness of the soup (so fresh! so well prepared!) make the disgusting hair now not disgusting but somehow appealing? Why does contamination only move in one direction: a small amount of what's nasty spoiling the whole, rather than an amount of what's appealing, appetizing, having a cleansing effect on the unclean?

Why would you push away the bowl of soup rather than eat the hair?

This is negativity dominance in play—negativity dominance, the near universal assumption that a pollutant has far greater power than what's pure, the near universal anxiety that what's unclean can spoil in such a way that what is clean could never purify. It's an assumption that comes to bear on so much the gospel would have us do: show hospitality to strangers, eat what food is on offer when we're guests, join in full membership with other people and peoples in a project of common humanity and life, true and abundant.

By contrast, Jesus demonstrates positivity dominance, a term Mr. Beck had to coin since it's not even in any parlance—neither sociological nor biological nor anthropological parlance, just now Christological. Positivity dominance: when the perfect comes and the imperfect either falls away or is itself perfected, made healthy and whole, simply by such good association. It's a vision that would come to bear on so much the gospel would have us do: it's a vision and a hope that would indeed make possible the *doing* of the gospel at all.

Mr. Beck warns, "...it is important to note that this is a deeply counterintuitive position to take. Nothing in our experience suggests this should be the case [—that what's positive should have dominance over what's negative]. The missional church [then, (that is, the church which is sent out into the world for the sake of the good news of God-with-us)] will always be swimming against the tide of disgust psychology, will always be tempted to separate, to withdraw, and to quarantine."

I tell you all this because it struck me as a useful image to hold in mind as I contemplate who Jesus is, moreover who Jesus was and is according to the gospel of Mark, the book that will be our

guide through most of this year. I tell you all this because I found it a helpful way to imagine Jesus' effect as he moved (and *moves!*) through the world.

A contagion of the good: I can imagine that, and I can act on that. Maybe you can, too.

Unfortunately, it doesn't speak so much to our passage this morning. No, unfortunately, our passage this morning remembers Jesus as far more active in having the desired effect, as far more forthright, even aggressive, in accomplishing his mission. Not merely setting the diabolical and the destructive spirits to flight, he's binding them up and plundering their households.

Or, rather not them, but perhaps the chief of them.

The strong man: call him Satan, as Mark would (accuser, the adversary); or call him the prince of the powers and principalities, as Walter Wink would have—he a theologian and a once-associate member of this church. The strong man whom Jesus would bind up: call him the *Übermensch*, the superman, as Nietzsche did, and as the Nazis did too; or call him the Man of Steel, a name claimed by Joseph Stalin, whose birth name was Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, but who preferred Stalin, “steel,” and who did indeed come to rule with an steely fist. (Incidentally, the creators of Superman, America's own “Man of Steel,” first envisioned him as a villain, in a graphic short story called “The Reign of Super-Man.”) Call this strong man any number of names—prince, priest, president, emperor, chancellor, masters of the universe of any number of sorts. Samuel would likely simply have called him king.

He didn't want the Israelites to insist on having a king. But insist they did: they wanted a king. They wanted to be like other nations; they wanted a king. They'd been led by Moses and then by priests. They'd been governed by judges and then by this prophet, Samuel, who himself had two sons whom he made judges so to rule. But they went their own way. They didn't have such devotion to the Lord, or to His Law, as Samuel did. So, as Samuel grew old, the people began to clamor for a king.

There were also forces beyond their borders that spurred the people to this insistence. There were also those powers—Egypt from the south, Babylon to the east, Syria to the north, the Hittites still further to the north—that had always vied to rule this tiny strip of land, except for now. No, for at this moment in history, each of these powers was distracted by their own internal strife. So, now was the moment for Israel to get its act together. Now was the moment for them to become a nation among nations, perhaps even an empire among empires.

It was a moment that gives way to this passage that's almost funny in its plain sense. Samuel heard the Israelites' insistence: “...appoint for us...a king to govern us, like other nations.” They

didn't want to be the chosen people of God; they wanted to be like other nations. They didn't want God to be their king; they wanted a man for that role—and preferably, I imagine, a strong man.

Samuel heard this, but not liking what he heard, he went to God, and he prayed to the Lord. The Lord, though, also told him what he didn't want to hear: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them...Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall also solemnly warn them of the ways of kings.”

And so he did. He told them, “This is what a king is good for. He will take your sons and make them either soldiers for his war-making or slaves for his well-being. He will take your daughters and make them either concubines in his harem or slaves in his household. He will take your property for his court and your livestock for his stable; he'll tax you to fill his treasury. Perhaps worst of all, he'll become king instead of the Lord your king, and on the day when you cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord won't answer you.”

And the Israelites said, “Okay!”

Saul would prove to be a disappointing king—corrupt and lacking in power. David, who would succeed him, would be terrible in his greatness—morally “interesting” as one very gentle commentator put it, but terribly “interesting” because of his tremendous charisma and authority. He had the power to do great and awful things; and so he did great and awful things. And, if David is the great king that Israel would for centuries remember and celebrate and mourn and await his coming again in an equal successor, then the rulers of this world must all be cast into doubt, held as transitory, provisional. Yes, if David is the best king imaginable, then kings and their entire ilk should be considered a dubious lot, should even be bound up, if not physically than at least in social structural. No one should have that much power—I mean no one who isn't absolutely good, incorruptible good.

It's funny, then, that Jesus' mother and brothers wanted to restrain him. They'd come having heard what people were saying about Jesus—that he was crazy, that he was possessed. They'd come because Jesus had, after some time away, come home, and they'd heard some distressing things, and now was their chance. They were likely worried about him. They might also have been worried for themselves. And now was their chance—they would go to him now that he was back and they'd restrain him, bind him up.

The translation we heard doesn't quite get this right. It says, “...for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” But, in fact, the idiom at play here is, “He has gone outside.” That's

how such a notion as “out of his mind” is rendered in biblical Greek idiom: “He has gone outside.” And, you know what? They were right. Jesus had indeed “gone outside.” Already, he had gone out to the Jordan to be baptized and out to the wilderness to be tempted. And eventually, of course, he would go outside the city walls while carrying a cross. Jesus would become the ultimate outsider.

He had indeed gone outside: his family was right, and they were right to be concerned. What’s more, he would continue to go outside because this is where he needed to be—outside where you can see anew what’s inside, where you can see the world, in all its manifestations and social constructions, for what it truly is. These social structures, these physical structures, none of these are absolute, so none of these are absolutely necessary, absolutely essential. They are somewhat necessary: we do need them. I just reread Paul Bowles’s horrifying short story “A Distant Episode.” Read that and know: we do need structures in order to function as human. We need governance, we need language, we need organization. We need shelter. We need clothing. (The scripture reading we didn’t hear this morning envisions God as sewing skins for Adam and Eve just prior to sending them out of the Garden.)

But we should never mistake such need and our means of fulfilling it all as anything other than provisional, things that will do for now. And we should always be watchful for the ways in which our structures cast some people out. We should always be wary of whether our structures are made in the spirit of this world or in the spirit of the kingdom where love reigns and all are welcome—needfully, hopefully, desired and welcome.

Perhaps it comes down to this: which king do we exalt with what we make of ourselves and our life together? Which king do we exalt with what we make and how we live?

It takes stepping outside. In order to see things more fully, in order to know things as they truly are, it takes stepping outside once in a while—which is more than we might manage to do. Most human imagining can only go so far outside its own assumptions, so far and no farther. That’s what makes assumptions, assumptions. We don’t know what ours are until we encounter something other, something radically strange and other.

Christ, however, could and can go all the way. Christ’s vision, it’s been said, was bi-focal. He could perceive in time, and he could perceive eternity. He could see each of us for whom we are and how we are and what we’re up against, and he could see the whole in its teeming, urgent, terrible loveliness.

I suppose this is what we’re attempting to do when we worship. I suppose we’re striving after that bi-focal perspective. Worship, after all, is to encounter God, to encounter Christ; and God

is, though intimately known to us, also utterly beyond us; and Christ is, though brother and friend, also stranger and disturber of our provisional peace.

To see: to see deeply and truly, to recognize what's provisional and to recognize what abides, to discern the difference between the strong man whose binding will be our salvation and the Christ whose unbinding *is* our salvation—on bound and on the loose in the world, at play in 10,000 places: I suppose this is one aim in worship.

When we step into this sanctuary, we are going outside.

Welcome, then, to the wild place where Christ reigns.

Thanks be to God.