

“What Do You See?”
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2012 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

The Gospel of Mark is vivid, dramatic and powerful. It is fast paced. It moves from scene to scene at a speed that sweeps you along, event by event. You don't have time to get bored. It reminds me of the rapidity of scene shifting in a Star Wars movie or in a computer war game on a teenager's Ipod. Mark's favorite transitional word is “immediately!”

Each one of the Gospels shapes the image of Jesus a bit differently. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus is an action hero figure, constantly taking on the forces that confront him at every turn. His is the hero's journey and the disciples, his followers, need to hang on for dear life.

Each of the Gospels deals with the same basic question: “Who is this Jesus?” The Gospel of Mark stands out. The first Gospel written, it answers this question by showing us Jesus in action. He doesn't speak in lengthy discourses as in the Gospel of Matthew. He doesn't speak in as many parables as in the Gospel of Luke. He is not characterized by metaphor after metaphor (bread, light, vine, etc.) as in the Gospel of John.

What you see is what you get in the Gospel of Mark. I'm reminded of the words attributed to St. Francis, “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” Jesus' words are sparse. Even the few parables he offers in the Gospel of Mark are pared down, sculpted for impact. Mostly, Jesus is saying in this Gospel, “Watch what I do and you will know who I am.”

When Jesus acts, miracles occur. Demons are cast out. Unclean spirits vanish. Lepers are cleansed. Storms vanish. The paralyzed move. The lame, blind and deaf leap, see and hear again. He defies the laws of gravity: he walks on water. He transforms mere morsels of food into a feast for thousands. He restores life at the point of death.

These miracles happen in the other Gospels, but in Mark the action rolls out wave after wave until we have to cry out: “Stop! Help! What is happening here? Who are you? Where do you get your power? How are you doing these things? Where did you come from? Can you do this in my life, whoever you are?”

Conflict permeates the Gospel of Mark. In these action packed stories, there is a good guy, a bad guy (or guys) and a victim (or victims). Jesus doesn't wear a cape with a big S on it, but it becomes clear that he has come to save. Will he be able to rescue the victim? Save him or her from the forces of evil? Who will win this battle? Will the victim be released? Will the captive go free?

The story we read this morning depicts the first acts of Jesus' ministry. It follows his baptism, his testing in the wilderness, his calling his first four disciples. He immediately goes to work . . . ready to show us who he is, why he's here.

There are three characters in this story: Jesus, the unclean spirit and the man. And, as with any good story, there is an audience: the onlookers, those listening, those watching Jesus. Some are already followers, disciples. Others are there to consider the possibility of following. They are the audience back then. We are the audience this morning. What do we see?

The conflict is over the man. The goal of the unclean spirit is to capture, possess, control, take over the man. Jesus' goal is to cleanse the man, to free the man of the unclean spirit, to free the captive, to rescue the victim overpowered by that which is trying to possess him.

“Oh, but,” you say, “This is just a story from a long time ago. Unclean spirits, demons with weird voices? What relevance does this story have for us today?”

But, I say to you. Have you ever seen someone possessed by greed, envy, depression, debilitating mental or physical illness, disease, alcohol, drugs, fear, rage? They are altered. We yearn for them to be free, to be released, to be healthy, to be whole. Somehow, we sense, don't we, that whatever has taken them over has separated them from their true selves and then as so often happens they are separated, cut off from their community, their friends, their family, from us. We yearn for their healing. Because deep down we seem to know that such dis-ease affects not only the person but those of us around him or her. We are all victims, possibly leading altered lives because one of us is not well.

Have you ever seen a group of people taken over by fear, by pride, by revenge, by a desire for power? Not only are they darkly transformed by such negative spirits, such demons, such unhealthy desires, but they can be destructive of all around them. They can negatively impact the health of a community, a nation, the entire world. We have seen examples of this in the past. It is still happening today around the world.

As we look at the question, “Who is this Jesus?” we also face the question that permeates the Gospel of Mark. “By whose authority does this Jesus act?” Because, ultimately, we have to choose who, what, we will follow. Because questions, the answers to which will define our life, constantly confront us: What authority rules my life? To whose voice do I listen? By what authority will I live and move and have my being in this one precious life I have been given? Who has power over me – a power that seeks to diminish me or one that leads me towards health, wholeness and peace? These are questions which face us as individuals and as we combine with others to form a group. What will control our actions? And what does that mean for our own life and the life of the world around us?

Jesus came to heal, to cast out that which fragments us against our true selves, to name that which divides us, to silence the voice of the enemy within us and cast it out, to bring *shalem* (health and wholeness), to bring *shalom* (peace). He acts with powerful authority: the authority given to him to save, the power given to him to love, the power to see with the eyes of the heart of God, the power to see and distinguish between that which is life enhancing and will support health, wholeness and peace and that which is diminishing which fragments and can ultimately kill the life force placed within us at our creation. Jesus comes to save us by the power of love.

I come away from this passage with a humbled understanding that I am like the man in the story, a victim, I am exceedingly vulnerable to negative forces which may operate in my life. I know that I need to be saved, over and over and over again, from blindness, from deafness, from that which can cripple me, paralyze me, control me, overpower me, enslave me. I come away from this passage identifying with the man. I need to be saved.

I come away from this passage identifying with the unclean spirit: that part of me or that part of my environment that wants to exercise complete control, possession and power over me, over the true self I was created to be. I have a part of me – a part of my internal and/or external environment that needs to be called out, needs to be cast aside or silenced into peaceful submission.

I come away from this passage identifying with the disciples in that audience. With a desire to follow this leader, but limited in my grasp of just what that might mean and how to do it. But I come away, like the disciples, with that yearning for love and meaning in my life that causes me to just hang on for dear life.

I come away from this passage identifying with the mere onlookers who have considered and continue to wonder, just who is this Jesus and by what authority has he come into my life. How and why is it he seems to have the power to release, restore, and renew me?

But most importantly I come away from this passage humbled by the powerful understanding that I am vulnerable to love, a love and peace that passes human understanding. But a vulnerability that leads me to yearn for that love, to risk my old ways of life to find it and be transformed by it.

What do you see in this passage?

What do see for your life?

What do you see for our life together?

What do you see for the life we all share as the church?