

Towson Presbyterian Church

January 26, 2020

Rev. Joel Strom

Mark 1:21-28

“We Make the Road By Walking – Ch. 21”: *A Third Option*

If you’ve been listening to the podcast Rob and I record every week, where we explore a chapter of “We Make the Road By Walking,” you might have noticed that *after* we get through our opening shenanigans and *after* we veer off on a tangent that has nothing to do with what we’re supposed to be talking about, we often comment about how we appreciate the way in which Brian attempts to view and understand scripture, and especially some of the more challenging stories of the Bible.

Brian says we often look at them in two ways: One, this story happened exactly as it was written. It is literal fact and we need to read it that way. Or two, the story is a prescientific legend and to a scientific mind, which our minds have been trained to think in such a way, the story is simply impossible to believe and therefore has nothing to say to us. As an example, the Old Testament story of Jonah and the big fish, which is one of favorite books in the Bible. From the first option, the story happened just as it was written. Jonah was swallowed by this big fish and hung out in his belly for a couple of days. The fish then threw him up, Jonah swam to shore, and we are asked to *believe* that it happened. In option number two, we might say that story did not happen just as it was written, and if I’m supposed to read it as if it happened just as it was written, well, then this story has nothing to say to me and let’s just throw it to the side.

Not all the time, but often, we put biblical stories in those two categories, and Brain says, and wisely I believe, we need a third option. Our reading from Mark this morning is begging for a third option.

Reading the beginning of the Gospel of Mark is like jumping into a car that’s already moving at about 40 miles an hour. Mark is not like Mathew and Luke, who have the birth stories of Jesus and the star and the Magi and the Shepherd and Mary and Joseph. You ease into the story of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. The beginning of the Gospel of Mark is like the new Star Wars moving that came out in December, *The Rise of Skywalker*. It’s received all kinds of criticism because it’s a Star Wars movie – *I tell ya, Star Wars fans, they are tough!* What I loved about *The Rise of Skywalker* is that it starts with a bang. There was no slow buildup to the story. I won’t give away the beginning but five minutes in and my hands are already gripping the sides of my chair.

In the first chapter of Mark, there’s no slow buildup. Jesus is baptized, he’s pushed out into the wilderness for 40 days by God’s Spirit, he then comes right out of the wilderness and says, “*The kingdom of God is here, right now, so change your lives!*” He calls his disciples and then walks into the synagogue in Capernaum, which is our story today. I’m already exhausted! But it doesn’t stop there. The next couple chapters describe Jesus healing people over and over and over again, with a few demon exorcisms sprinkled in. The first few chapters of Mark are

exciting, but they're also a little exhausting, because they're filled with stories of Jesus healing people, and it can be hard to make sense of these healings.

Stories like ours this morning don't always fit into the way we look and think about the world, and that makes them hard to relate to. And this story, today, is even a little more perplexing, because it's a man who was possessed, and possessed by an "unclean spirit."

To start, it's helpful to not read this story through the lens of Hollywood, and this is coming from someone who loves movies. I've often done this in the past. We hear words such as "possessed" and it can be easy to picture a spinning head and levitating body, and we can quickly settle back into those two options that Brian described: 1) It happened exactly as it was written and therefore I believe it to be true and miracles and supernatural healings happen, or 2) I can't make sense of any of this – it doesn't compute with how I understand the world - and so miracles do not happen and this story has nothing to say to me. We need a third option because there's so much more to this story than breaking it down into those two options.

This is Jesus's first act, first public sign of who he is and what he's come to do, and the first thing that happens is he encounters a man who is in pain. This man is undoubtedly suffering, and *something* has its hooks in him. What that is I don't know, but something is keeping him from wholeness and an abundant life and being the person that God longs for him to be...and I would assume he longs to be as well. And Jesus seems to be very concerned about it. We could even say that Jesus is opposed to anything that is robbing this person from a life of joy and meaning and purpose. In this story and in the opening chapters of Mark, Jesus sees human suffering and moves right towards it. He is not indifferent to it or unmoved by it; he is deeply concerned about it. Thanks be to God!

Brian says we need a third option when we look at stories such as this and he poses this question: *What happens to us when we imagine miracles happening?* He says, perhaps a story such as this is intended to do more than just inform us about something that happened years ago that we are simply to believe in. He says, maybe these stories are meant to shake up our assumptions and instead of only reflecting on what happened way back then, what could happen in us right now as we reflect upon the story? Because when we have only those first two options in front of us, what they can do is keep a story like this at a distance from us, right? It occurred a long time ago to a man in a synagogue in Capernaum and I am asked to simply believe if it happened or not.

A third option invites us to think about how this story could be read today, because today we might say that this man in Capernaum was emotionally or mentally unwell. Instead of being possessed by a spirit or even a demon, we might see him possessed by a chemical imbalance or a psychiatric disorder. A third option would invite us to ask questions about our own lives and our own culture that we live in. We might ask what unhealthy spirits are troubling us, or have their hooks in us right now, as individuals and as a people? What fears or negative beliefs are within us that alter our behaviors? And what unclean or unhealthy thought patterns can oppress us or possess us as a community and as a culture?

We could talk about the big ones, too – addiction to alcohol and drugs and gambling - and people that have experienced those know first and foremost what it feels like to be possessed by something that has its hooks in them, that has control and power over them. But there are others I think we can all relate to.

The Lutheran pastor David Lose wisely describes how we can look at this story from a third option. He admits that he's had moments in his life where anger has come out of him that he is not proud of and felt like it had control over him.¹ Can I relate to David's experience? I sure can. Anger is a very natural emotion, but at the same time it can be released from our bodies in healthy and unhealthy ways.

If you haven't seen it, I wholeheartedly recommend the movie "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" that came out in December where Tom Hanks plays Fred Rogers. I loved it, and in it Mr. Rogers stresses the need to release our anger in healthy ways, and says one of the best ways we can do it is to punch a pillow or bang our hands on the keys of the piano.

I wish my anger has always been released in healthy ways like that, but if I'm honest, on occasion it hasn't been, and I've said things I regret. David takes it a step further by saying, and what about feeling envious of someone or jealous to the degree that you felt like it just had its hooks in you? I think we can all relate to this kind of possession. Or what about those that our culture pretty much approves of and affirms? What about workaholism or greed and never having enough money and always wanting more and more and more? Those can take over and control us as well.

A third option for looking at a story like this is to ask ourselves what unhealthy spirits are troubling us as individuals and as a society...but it also invites us into the practice of trust and hope.

This man from Capernaum sitting in a synagogue on the Sabbath possessed by something that had its hooks in him, possessed by something that was keeping him from a life of joy, purpose and meaning – a life that God desired for him – *and he was healed*. He was set free from whatever that had its hooks in him. Brian says a third option invites us to ask *do we dare believe that we could be set free, too? That such a miracle could happen to us, today?*

When we get to that place, when we surrender ourselves to God and invite God into our lives, into the messiness of our lives, this story today unequivocally says that God longs for healing in our lives. And that healing or transformation is usually not instantaneous like it was for the man in Capernaum. It's a gradual letting go and trusting that God does in fact long for us to experience lives of joy and meaning and purpose.

Brian says, "*You may or may not believe in literal miracles, but faith still works wonders.*"

Thanks be to God.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2012/04/mark-1-21-28-2/>