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Mark 1:21-28

Have You Come to Destroy Us?

Twenty years ago, Reynolds Price, well-known author, and long-time professor of English here at Duke, developed a tumor in his spinal chord. The cancer was a foot long and like a thick vine choking off the roots of a delicate bush, the tumor had wrapped itself around the delicate nerves in his upper back. About a month after his first surgery, Reynolds Price had, what he calls, a “happening.” He describes it in one of his books. One moment he was comfortably resting in his own bed. The next he was in first century Palestine on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Dr. Price sees Jesus moving his way, gently inviting him to follow out into the sea. Professor Price describes the scene like this, “We waded out into the cool lake water twenty feet from shore until we stood waist-deep. Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once – “Your sins are forgiven” – and turned to shore again, done with me. I came on behind him, thinking in standard greedy fashion, *It’s not my sins I’m worried about*. So to Jesus’ receding back, I had the gall to say “Am I also cured?” Jesus turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words – “that too.” Price titles the book, “A Whole New Life.”

A Whole New Life. We are a mere 21 verses into Marks’ gospel when today’s story takes place. We are in the early days of Jesus’ ministry. In the lesson that precedes the one assigned for today, Jesus calls together the 12 disciples, and now this fledgling band of oddball fishermen, tax collectors, and one carpenter with a startling ability to teach and preach about the kingdom of God, have found themselves in the fishing village of Capernaum, on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, the same sea where Reynolds Price was given a whole new life.

Jesus of Nazareth begins his ministry in the Galilean country-side, proclaiming the good news of repentance and forgiveness, proclaiming that God’s kingdom is bursting forth all around, and the people of Galilee cannot get enough. Wherever he goes, they flock to hear what he has to say. Mark tells us that Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching on the Sabbath, and the story makes it clear that Jesus is good. He is no adjunct lecturer brought in from Chapel Hill at the last minute to fill a class. Jesus is engaging, provocative, intense, imaginative. He teaches as one with authority, and everyone in the synagogue is astounded.

Suddenly, in the midst of his passionate teaching in the synagogue about the kingdom, something strange happens. Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. One of them, the man or the spirit, cries out to Jesus, but the text isn’t clear which one. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Perhaps the unclean spirit has dug so deeply into his soul that the desperate man can no longer tell where he ends and the spirit begins, like a cancerous tumor intertwines with and feeds off healthy cells. The cry comes, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God?”

The first thing to note is this scene is playing out in a place of worship on the Sabbath, the Jewish equivalent to our Sunday morning service. People come to worship for all sorts of reasons. Some come because their lives are full of stress and busyness and this one hour on Sunday mornings is the only time in the week where they can be still, quiet, and turn themselves over to God. Some come because they feel obligated, or they hear their parents in the recesses of their minds, “be sure you get to church on Sunday.” Many come for the grand organs, the beautiful choir, and the cool sermons preached with an English accent. Some come because church is on the list of ten things to do to achieve a balanced life: exercise five days a week, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, get plenty of sleep, take your vitamins, call your mother, save for retirement, and oh yes, go to church on Sunday.

And then, and then, there are those who come to church because they have nowhere else to turn. Their lives are in such turmoil, overwhelmed by so much pain, they feel powerless, they have nothing left to cling to but God. Maybe you are grieving the loss of a loved one and the agony never seems to end. Perhaps no matter what you do, you cannot forgive yourself for something in the past. Maybe you returned to Duke this semester and you feel lost and alone, and you are struggling with depression or anxiety and it was all you could do to will yourself to Chapel this morning. Perhaps above all, church is for all of you.

Notice in the passage, in the midst of Jesus’ teaching and preaching in that packed synagogue, it is not one of the healthy people, those for whom life is just so great and wonderful, but the man who is hurting, whose life is being ripped apart from the inside out by who knows what, he is the one who recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Holy One of God, who has come in some very real sense to destroy our old lives and give us a whole new life.

Every Wednesday night I meet with a group of students, mostly seniors, who are struggling with what to do after they leave Duke, seeking to discern where God might be calling them to go. Stress relieving jokes about running away to a big city in the Northeast without telling the parents abound, but sometimes the kingdom of God breaks into our midst, and the Holy one of God takes a seat at the table. This past week we shared our hopes and dreams for our friendships and relationship with God this coming semester. We all made nice, appropriate comments about how we want to nurture the friendships that matter to us, how we want to learn to pray better, and read scripture more often, all good things. And then one student who became a Christian only a couple of years ago said, “I feel so distant from God. I feel so sad. I can’t pray anymore. I can’t will myself to go to church anymore. I feel as if I have abandoned God or God has abandoned me, and I feel so lost.” There was some hurting part of her deep inside that was crying out like the man in the synagogue. She seemed to recognize what the rest of us didn’t, that if Jesus is anything, he is everything. She didn’t want her faith to be merely another line on a resume’ of well-roundedness. This Jesus comes, not to be forced into an otherwise unchanged life, but in some very real way, to destroy our old lives, and rebuild us from the ground up.

Marianne Williamson says, “When you ask Jesus into your life, you think he is going to come into your psychic house, look around, and see that you just need a new floor or better furniture and that everything just needs a little cleaning -- and so you go along for the first six months thinking how nice life is now that Jesus is there. Then you

look out the window one day and see that there's a wrecking ball outside. It turns out that God actually thinks your whole foundation is shot and you're going to have to start over from scratch.”

Have you come to destroy us, Jesus? Is Christianity just another badge we wear on the outside of an already proper and well managed life, or is it the very heart of who we are? When my brother and I were toddlers my mom discovered that the neighbor kids, both about our age, had chicken pox, so she marched us right across the street to play in the hopes that we would catch the contagious sickness. Taken at face value, this seems rather odd, but it was a wonderful parenting strategy because she knew if we were exposed to chicken pox as children and got a little sick it would build our immunity and we would never get it again, whereas if you get chicken pox as an adult it can be terrible, even deadly. Perhaps for a lot of us Christianity is like this. We've been exposed to Jesus just a bit for our own protection, but not enough for him to mean everything, never enough to get truly infected with the Gospel lest the lives that we know be destroyed, lest we be given a whole new life by the Holy One of God.

When I was about a junior in college, at a very tender time, trying to discern who I was, what I really believed and what I would do with my life. I had been going to church all my life, I was involved in a campus ministry, and I came to a point where I reasoned this Christianity is either everything or it is nothing. I didn't see any middle way. So I went to my campus minister, told him my predicament, and asked him what I should do? He was a wise man, and he looked at me over his glasses and said, “Are you sure?” And with great enthusiasm I said, “You bet I'm sure, I'm ready for my faith to be everything.” “Only if you're sure,” and he reached to the top of his bookshelf and took down a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I'd never heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but I looked at the book with the blood red lettering on the front against a cold white background, and I said, “Yeah, yeah, that's what I want; I want my discipleship to be costly.” So I went home giddy with excitement about becoming a serious Christian. That night I read the back of the book and learned Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who, out of allegiance to Christ, had stood up to the Nazis in World War II and lost his life in a German prison camp because of his faith. I thought, “That's it, that's the sort of faith I want to have.” And I read through the first few pages where Bonhoeffer says the grace of God is not cheap, it comes with a cost, and that cost is our allegiance, our faithfulness, our passion for the Kingdom of God, for the cross of Christ alone, and I said, “Yes, tell me more Dietrich, tell me more!” (Pause)

I got all the way to about page 12. That's where Bonhoeffer writes, “When Christ calls you he calls you to come and die!” After that line, I closed the book, suddenly deciding I had read plenty for one night. The next morning I walked into my campus minister's office with Dietrich in hand, passed the book over, and said, “Any other suggestions? I'm not sure I want to be a Christian that much.”

Bonhoeffer was right, of course. When Christ comes, he comes like a wrecking ball to destroy our old lives and build us anew from the inside out, not with a little Gospel exposure just in case, but a life changing infection with the Kingdom of God. Jesus comes to turn our world upside down, to say the kingdom of God is at hand, the kingdom where the poor are treasured and blessed, the kingdom where enemies are loved into friends, the kingdom where the meek shall inherit the earth, the kingdom made visible when two are three gather to pray, the kingdom that comes when someone cries out in

pain and says “I am hurting will you comfort me.” The kingdom that comes when the people of a gothic church leave the comfort of stone walls and reach out to a beautiful and hurting city, saying “We want to learn from you, may we be friends somehow?”

For three more years Jesus preached and taught and healed and lived into the kingdom of God all across the Galilean countryside and in Jerusalem itself. But after three years the same people who were so excited at the beginning of his ministry, who packed the synagogues and fields to listen to this man teach, people just like us, after three years we had had enough. It was too much; it cost too much to follow him. We closed the book, hoping there was another way to the kingdom. Jesus willingly gave himself into our hands and out of anger, fear, and frustration we nailed him to an olive shaft. We destroyed his life, and threw him in the grave. But that grave could not hold him. God raised his Son Jesus to new life, an empty grave, an empty grave, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the triumphant sign of the kingdom of God, and the once and for all gift of a whole new life to all of us. Amen.