

March 27, 2011

Third Sunday of Lent

“What Kind of Story?”

The Gospel of Mark Chapters 9-16, selected verses

Hindsight, even when helpful, is rarely 20/20, at least not for events and experiences more than a year removed. What do you remember about 1971? Some of you were not born yet. Others of you were already adults, leaders in this very church. Here are some statistics and headlines from 1971:

Year End Close Dow Jones Industrial Average 890

Average Cost of new house \$25,250.00

Average Income per year \$10,600.00

Average Monthly Rent \$150.00

Cost of a gallon of Gas 40 cents

Datsun 1200 Sports Coupe \$1,866.00

United States postage Stamp 8 cents

Fed EX was started

Nasdaq began

Charles Manson convicted

Attica Prison riots

Vietnam war was on-going

Walt Disney World in Orlando opened

Voting age lowered to 18

NPR broadcast 1st time

Chances are, none of you thought of these things when I first mentioned 1971. We usually think in more personal terms. Where were you geographically in 1971? Geography often jogs memory, even very local geography, like, what house you were living in at the time. What house was it for you? Who were the people in that house then that are no longer with you? Are there sounds and smells associated with that house? Were there predominant emotions in that house, such as laughter, or fear, love or uncertainty? Where were you geographically and emotionally in 1971?

The house I recall at age eight was an 800 square foot brink ranch house on Henry Avenue in Seneca, S.C., and inside that house were my 10 year old brother, nine year old sister, twenty-four year old mother, twenty-nine year old step-father who had married my mother the year before, and my sixty-nine year old maternal grandmother. But what about you? Where were you, and who was with you?

Activities and occupations can jog memory. Where were you in terms of school or work in 1971? If in school, what teachers do you recall, if any? What friends do you remember? If working, what do you recall about co-workers, bosses, the commute, or the work itself?

I was in second grade, and I don't recall my teacher, but I remember being in love with classmate Sharon Shipman, exchanging hand-printed notes on large-lined, beige paper, then playing chase at recess at Southside Elementary School. But what about you?

If you were to write a book, or say, a chapter in a larger book, about your life in 1971, who was the person, or, who were the people who would be the heroes, the people who most helped you? Picture their faces, recall their names, and give thanks.

Now, let's suppose instead of sitting here in this quaint, safe, church sanctuary today, we are instead part of the Japanese people who have recently lost everything, our home, our work, our photo albums, and even some of our loved ones. Imagine we are in a shelter with nothing more than the clothes on our back and a Red Cross blanket, and we are cold and hungry and in shock as the world we knew just vanished. And let's suppose we are fearful that we may not live much longer, perhaps sensing we have been exposed to high-levels of radiation. Suppose further, that, fearing we may not live much longer, we decide to write a few pages about the best year in our life, and let's suppose that year was 1971, forty years ago.

What does any of this have to do with the Gospel of Mark? I want you to feel and sense something of what it would have been like for the writer of Gospel of Mark, writing forty years after the experiences he describes, and writing after the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, writing from a place of displacement and fear and uncertainty, wanting to write down some things knowing he may not live much longer.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark has no idea there will be a New Testament of which his writing will be a part. He has no idea that is writing something that will one day become part of "The Bible." Add to this the difficulties of memory and displacement, forgetfulness and fear, he simply writes what he remembers about those days forty years ago.

And what kind of story does he write?

Is it a story of absolute confidence and faith? Chapter 16, verse 8 is how the story ends: "*Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" The story ends with fear and silence, with verses 9- 20 being added much later by someone uncomfortable with such an unsettled ending.

Is this a story of unblemished heroes defeating baneful villains? The heroes of the story, besides Jesus, are the apostles. They are the ones who started the church, not Jesus. The church had been around for forty years, and you would think that the stories written about the founders of the church would extol their virtues, like the stories of America's founding fathers (the cherry tree). Instead, we have things like chapter 9 verse 32: "*But they did not understand what Jesus was saying, and they were afraid to question him.*" And then that is immediately followed by the description of the apostles arguing with one another, followed by more pronouncements of their lack of understanding, and then, of course, Peter's denials, Judas' betrayal, and these ominous words that appear only in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 14 and verse 50, "*And they all left him and fled.*" Because of such stories and descriptions, when I imagine the twelve apostles, I often imagine men like the Three Stooges, Moe, Larry, and Curly.

Is this story written in the Gospel of Mark a story of complete faith and serene peace? Again, Mark 15:34 tells us, "*Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*" And with that plaintive question on his lips, he died, never again to speak in Mark's Gospel.

My point is this: we often read the Gospels with a pre-set image of what kind of story it is, and that pre-set image goes something like, Jesus was miraculously born, lived a miraculous life with his chosen apostles, then the bad guys crucified him, but then Jesus and the good guys overcame them in the resurrection, and they lived happily ever after.

Forty years after the resurrection, they are not living happily ever after. Forty years later, amid the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem, a more complicated and nuanced story was written, and written in the way it was because the author himself is not at all sure how the story will end. One of the things he does know for sure is that no matter how the story will end, the story, for now at least, doesn't solve all the problems of war and sin and human foibles, nor does it erase all doubt or even all sense of—at times—being utterly forsaken, when the earth opens up and tsunami waves wash away all you previously knew.

What does this have to do with us in 2011 in this quiet, safe, American church sanctuary? Among other things, I think it answers the following questions:

Can we be part of God's kingdom even though at times we feel forsaken? Answer, yes.

Can we be a part of God's kingdom even though we've not always been faithful disciples? Answer, yes.

Is God still alive and present, "still going on before us," even when we've lost everything, our home, our health, and a significant part of our heritage? Answer, yes.

Can we be a part of God's kingdom even when our lives are not neat and in order? Answer, yes.

Mark's Gospel is not a happily ever after story, and it is not a "if you believe, you will be healthy, wealthy, and wise" story. Such story lines lead to people feeling like the church on Sunday morning is only for the people who "have it together," happily married with 2.5 children, a pet Chihuahua, and a house with three car garage in a nice neighborhood; or, that church on Sunday morning is only for those people who are utterly confident in their answers, whose faith is absent any earth-shattering fault-lines. Church can be too "sunny," an unwelcoming place to those experiencing the dark sides of life. I've had people say, "I just can't come to church because I don't feel like smiling and chatting about the weather over a cup of coffee." Or, "I can't come to church now because I don't want to answer questions about _____," and the blank can be filled in with any number of things like a divorce, a child who was arrested, a loss of job, etc. I also regular get people coming to me for counseling, people from other churches, because they are too embarrassed to go to their own clergy, and while I am not aware of any, I suspect the opposite has happened as well.

Mark's Gospel is not a happily ever after story: it is more real than that. It is not a simple story of good guys and bad guys: it is more nuanced than that. It is real enough and nuanced enough to make sense in the midst of our very real lives of catastrophes and conflicts, joys and sorrows, faith and doubt, discouragement and hope. May it be so for you, this day and always.

What follows is a portion of talk given by Barbara Brown-Taylor in which she also talks about the "too sunny church." For the full talk, you can go to

<http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374063.htm>

When I speak of public truth, then, this is what I mean: not the proclamation of some indisputable fact about God or the Bible but the saying-out-loud of something true about human life on earth, in the presence of living people who can either nod their heads knowingly or cross their arms over their chests and sit back in their seats. As my teacher Fred Craddock once said in my hearing, people don't come to church to hear you tell them what they do not know; they come to hear you say what they want to say but don't know how. This is the public truth of the sermon, or at least of the sermons that have inspired me.

There are limitations, of course. Because the art of the sermon tends to be practiced in church, both the subject and the language need to be "G" or at least "PG." As much as I admire the salty writing of Anne Lamott, for instance, I cannot quote her best passages in church, anymore than I can rise to her use of language. The "f" word figures prominently in her conversion story, but to retell it substituting "the f word" takes all the starch out of it.

If I have watched my own language in church, it is because there are often children present. This is a good reason to be careful about what I say. A bad reason is because many people of faith seem to believe that God also needs to be protected from the earthier preoccupations of the human heart. Or maybe we are just protecting one another, by declining to confess in one another's presence what really keeps us awake at night. A preacher who wants to keep his or her job would do well to avoid trying to say anything true about sex, money, politics, war, or existential despair in church. It is also not a good idea to question established readings of scripture or tradition.

Of course there are churches where such discussions are both expected and welcome—but on the whole I have suffered from what I think of as the “full sun” syndrome in church, where there are not only taboo subjects and modes of expression but also taboo modes of being—all of which place limits on how much public truth may be spoken.

May I read a passage from my book?

In my role, I could act out of my best nature for hours at a time. I could produce kindness when all I feel is fatigue. I could present patience when circumstances warrant irritation. I could shine like the sun until long after dark when I need to, but my soul did not operate on a solar calendar.

My soul operated on a lunar calendar, coming up at a different time every night and never looking the same two nights in a row. Where my role called for a steady circle of bright light, my soul waxed and waned. There were days when I was as full as a harvest moon and others when not so much as a sliver appeared in the sky. My soul's health depended on the regular cycle of these phases. I needed the dark nights that gave the stars their full brilliance as much as I needed the nights when the moon shone so brightly that I could make shadow puppets with my hands. The problem with the collar was that it did not allow for such variations. It advertised the steady circle of light, not the cycles, so that it sometimes scorched my neck.

I do not think that I was the only one who suffered from too much sun in church. One thing that had always troubled me was the way people disappeared from church when their lives were breaking down. Separation and divorce were the most common explanations for long absences, but so were depression, alcoholism, job loss, and mortal illness. One new widow told me that she could not come to church because she started crying the moment she sat down in a pew. A young man freshly diagnosed with AIDS said that he stayed away because he was too frightened to answer questions and too angry to sing hymns. I understood their reasoning, but I was sorry that church did not strike these eclipsed souls as a place they could bring the dark fruits of their equally dark nights.

Some of them returned when their moons had filled out a little and others did not, but even people in no apparent crisis seemed to suffer from the full-sun effect. As enjoyable as it could be to spend a couple of hours on Sunday morning with people who were at their best, it was also possible to see the strain in some of the smiles, the effort it took to present the most positive,

most faithful version of the self. Sometimes I could almost read the truth written out above people's heads. "Please don't believe me. This is only a shard of who I really am." The cost of the pretense was the loss of the real human texture underneath, but since we all thought that was what was expected of us, that was what we delivered.