

Everyone; Everywhere: Mark 1: 21-45

Good News? 2, Plymouth Park, Sunday, September 16, 2007

The year was 1958, in the midst of segregation, people from all over the country gathered in Newport, Rhode Island for the Newport Jazz Festival. The best of the best of blues, jazz and gospel musicians gathered to ring out their song in the midst of a country that would not let them sing.

On the Sunday of the festival, the announcer took the stage to introduce the next act. “Ladies and Gentleman, it is Sunday, and it is time for the World’s Greatest Gospel Singer, Miss Ma-hay-lia Jackson.” And with that Mahalia Jackson took the stage. This morning we are going to listen to one of the live tracks recorded on that Sunday morning, “Joshua Fit The Battle of Jericho.”

Play Song.

The crowd rang out with this old slave song. As you heard, they asked her to sing it. “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” was one of her best loved songs, not so much because of Mahalia, though she could really sing that song, but because of the story the song retold.

As the story of Joshua and the walls of Jericho was told in the midst of the oppressed slaves, and later retold in the segregated days of Jim Crow, it was a story of unbelievable odds. The ragtag wilderness wanderers called Israelites, led by their shepherd Joshua, don’t have a chance against the fortified city of Jericho. The odds are stacked against them; the people of Jericho a formidable foe. Yet, under the cloak of night, God marches Joshua and his Israelite flock around and around the city, until “the walls came tumblin’ down.”

For an oppressed people, this story rings true. Because it is a story about a God who torn down walls for his people, and this was a God they desperately needed.

It is this God we meet in Mark, as the person of Jesus. The same God who befriends Abraham, calls out Moses, triumphantly leads Abraham’s descendants out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, and marches these same people victorious around Jericho—this God is now present in the ministry of Jesus.

Mark tells this story of the wall tumblin’ Jesus with great urgency. Throughout his book, the word “immediately” is repeated over and over and over again, so much so, that our English Bible have cleaned it up a bit, substituting other words to reduce redundancy.

But using synonyms will not slow Mark’s story down. This is a short book, and it moves very quickly. Jesus rips and roars from the first chapter. There’s no story of Jesus’ birth, no angels or sheperds or wiseman. From page one there’s Jesus

on the move, and there's no stopping him. The kingdom of God has come near. When God moves, the walls come tumblin' down.

As we saw last week, after Jesus was baptized, the heavens torn a part and the Spirit descends on Jesus. This is no quaint baptismal scene that we like to paint and fix onto stained glass windows. Jesus, pale faced, looking like he's in a trance, up to his waste in the Jordan River, with a white, Olympic Games' dove gently perched on his shoulder. The voice of God speaks gently, "Excuse me. Excuse me. I'd like for you to meet my son Jesus. He's new around here. I sure am, proud of him." How sweet, we want to say after looking at that picture.

This is not the story Mark tells. In the beginning of Mark's story, the heavens rip open, torn a part, the barrier between humanity and God—gone. Later in his story, towards the end, there's another "tearing". As Jesus is dying on the cross, the curtain in the temple that separates the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, that symbolic wall that kept the people at a safe distance from God, it too is "torn a part". The message from the beginning of the story to the end is clear:

When God moves, the walls come tumblin' down.

After the heavens rip open, and God slips through the tear, the Spirit comes into Jesus, and immediately, it sets him on the loose. First into the wilderness with the devil. Then to the shores of Galilee to call his first disciples, and then, before we even have a chance to catch our breath, Jesus is in Capernaum performing miracles.

This trip to Capernaum is Jesus' first mission trip. You would think his first time out, away from home, he'd take it easy. Not this Jesus, he's running out of the gate, casting out demons left and right. Healing the deathly ill. Cleansing a leper. This is his first ministry, and he's pulling out all the stops.

When I started preaching for you almost a year ago, I decided to take it easy. I couldn't preach my best sermons right off: I'd have nothing left to say. I couldn't wow you with all my tricks: I needed to ease into things, let you get to know me a little bit. You can't show up in a new church, ripping and tearing your way through the pews, casting out all the old demons in the church and touching the lepers.

Jesus shows up on the scene, fresh from the waters of baptism, the heavens torn open, the kingdom of God has come near!

Mark's Jesus is a wild one; a dangerous one. You better stay away from this Jesus for your own safety? For when he moves, your walls may come tumblin' down as well.

The problem Jesus has from the start is that no one stays away. They don't seem to mind that he's wild—they flock to him!

You gotta come see this guy, Jesus. He's a wild one, this Jesus. Remember crazy ole Charlie, demon-possessed Charlie? Not anymore he's not. Not after Jesus touched him. And Mildred, Simon's Mother-in-Law. Her fever's gone. We can take her off the prayer list. You gotta come see this guy, Jesus.

And come they do, in droves. Everyone comes to Jesus from everywhere, Mark says. Twice he tells us this. "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee"—that's cleaned up a bit. Literally, his fame spread everywhere. Then later, "People came to him from every region"...from everywhere!

They're coming to Jesus; there's no stopping them. They've heard of this wild, wide-eyed, wonder-working prophet from Galilee and they've got to see him first hand. He's ripping and tearing through Capernaum. Capernaum's never seen anything like this Jesus. He's socializing with the demon-possessed. He's touching lepers. We gotta see this Jesus.

When God moves, walls come tumblin' down. And they're falling all over our Capernaum this morning. People come running to see Jesus, because finally, the wall between God and humanity has been torn down through the person of Jesus. There's no barriers, no walls, just the immediate, direct presence of God. The walls come tumblin' down, and everyone from everywhere come running through the rubble to see Jesus.

I often wonder as I read these stories of Jesus, if I were there, where would I be in this story? A crazy guy shows up into our town, fresh out of the baptistry, and he's casting out demons, healing mother-in-laws, and cleansing lepers. How would I respond? What role would I play in the story?

Would I start looking over my arms and chest, looking for something to heal, a mole, a small spot melanoma that Jesus might take care of? Would I let him cast my demons out?

Would I have the audacity to come to a prophet of God, knowing full well that I am dying of leprosy, and not only that, that my disease is contagious and I am considered by Jewish customs to be the most unclean of the unclean? Would I be brave enough, desperate enough to beg of Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Would I come from everywhere to see him? Or would I stand back and quietly shake my head. What does he think he's doing, touching a leper? Who does he think he his, preaching with this great authority so that even the demons obey him?

Where would I be in this story?

I don't know about you, but I'd like to think I'd be right there with Jesus, doing all I could to bring the people to Jesus. "Everyone is searching for you, Jesus," I imagine myself saying. "Let's get these people healed!"

But if I'd be with Jesus in those places, with those kinds of people in the story, why am I not in these same places today? If I would be right there in the fray, touching the leper, speaking to the man crazy with demons—in the story—why won't I touch the person dying of AIDS in my own neighborhood, or speak with the schizophrenic paces down the street with his head phones on, talking to himself? Where would I be in this story?

We mentioned Mark's "unsettling Messiah" last week, and that's what we see here. The other Gospels work their way to Jesus. They begin with Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah. There's wise-men and shepherds, stars and managers. Several chapters later, adult Jesus shows up, performing miracles. We've worked our way up to the good stuff.

Not Mark. He doesn't have the time to wait. The kingdom of God has come near, Mark yells. There's no waiting around. It's here! It's now! The heavens are ripped open, the Spirit is descending. The walls have come down. The walls have come down, and God has come near.

This is not the kind of story you hold onto for a while. This is not the kind of story you work your way up to. Your wife walks in the door after a long day of work, and you can't help but blurt it out the moment she enters the house: Jesus came to town, he cast out a demon, healed a woman, cast out more demons, touched a leper.

"What? Slow down a moment. Who is this Jesus?"

Jesus, the guy from Galilee. He came to town. Everyone from everywhere was going to see him.

Mark can't wait to tell us this story. This is good news. The kingdom of God has come near. The walls have come down. God is near, and he's in our town, casting out *our* demons; healing *our* sick; touching *our* untouchables, breaking down *our* walls.

And how do we feel about this news?

You know, for a long time I used to believe that what made the religious folks so mad at Jesus was that he had all this miraculous power that they didn't have. They were jealous. He had the power; he had the crowds. But after spending some time in Mark's world, looking around at all the places

Mark takes us, seeing his picture of Jesus, I think there's more to the anger of the religious folks than simply that they resent his miraculous power.

I think they believe he has miraculous power. They think he is genuine, the real deal. And they almost believed he is the Messiah, until he starts using his power on *those* kinds of people. You know, those kinds of people. The waifs, the tax collectors, the lepers, the insane, the workers in the sex industry, the abusive and the abused. The people we wouldn't even speak to, let alone touch them and let alone give them a good gift.

He used his power on them!? The crazy guy who says he has demons—he used his power on him? A dirty mouth, no good, Godless fisherman's mother-in-law—he used his power on her? An unclean, impure, dirty leper—he touched the leper?

When God shows up, the walls come tumblin' down. Social barriers collapse. The buffer zone between heaven and earth is torn in two, and Jesus is right there in Capernaum with the crazy demon guy, the mother-in-law and the leper. And there are some religious folk who don't like this.

Let's face it, church. We like to keep Jesus in our temples, behind our curtain keeping God at a safe distance. We like to keep Jesus tucked away beyond the clouds, just out of reach, so we can talk to him, but never hear what he has to say to us.

But the temple curtain has been ripped in two! The heavens have been torn a part! The walls have come tumblin' down, and Jesus has fallen from the heavens, rolled off a cloud, and landed right in the midst of a broken, stained, stinky, diseased, unclean people.

And we can sit in our churches, keeping Jesus locked safely away in the church basement, the door blocked by our doctrines and traditions and comforts. But Jesus rips open our religion; he tears away our prejudices, kicking the door off the church basement and runs out into the street, touching the untouchable, freeing the crazy guy, sitting with a dying old woman.

Try as we may, church, we can't contain Jesus. The heavens can't hold him, religion can't control him, and even the grave can't contain him. He's breaking forth, out of our churches and into our towns, living among the people.

And thanks be to God!

For if are honest with ourselves, we realize too that we are right there with the people. We've got sick mother-in-laws and demons of our own. We've got our own leprosy eating away at us, making us unclean before God—yet God has come and touched even us.

And our walls are beginning to tumble, and through the holes we see Jesus living among the people, and we can hear him calling us to do the same.

Church, we've been baptized with Christ. We share in the same Spirit Christ received. And we are called to his same mission; the wall-tumblin' mission, so that we can be the very immediate presence of God among the people.

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.

(After the sermon, Travis will walk to the table, you will come and pray the following at the pulpit)

Oh God who tears down walls, tear down our walls today. The walls of injustice, the walls of racism, the walls of addiction, the walls of indifference.

Tear down our walls today, and set us free to be your presence among the people. That we will offer your healing, your grace, your touch to all in our world, even those we deem untouchable.

Thank you for embracing us when we were unclean.

And now, as our Lord has taught us to pray, we pray boldly,

*Our Father, Who art in Heaven.
Hallowed be Your Name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And led us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom
And the power
And the glory forever.
Amen.*

(After prayer, meet Travis at the table.)