

28 June 2015

The Beginning of the Good News
Mark 3-5; Hebrews 2:10-18

Last week I started telling the story of Jesus, following the Gospel of Mark, and we ended with Jesus offending the scribes, important visitors from the temple in Jerusalem. And he didn't even seem to care. He said, "I haven't come to fix the old faith; I've come to start something new."

We pick up right there: continues offending important people. I mentioned last week how important the sabbath day was to the Jews – doing no work on the seventh day was the outward sign that they were different in the eyes of God. Well, one day Jesus and his friends are walking through some grainfields on the sabbath, and they're hungry. His friends start plucking the heads of grain from the stalks, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the kernels. The scribes have a fit. "Look at that! Harvesting on the sabbath! Sin! Sin!" But Jesus says, "Remember the story of David, how one time he and his men were hungry, so he fed them the sacred bread of the priests? Was that a sin?" The scribes say nothing. They know better than to criticize the Jews' national hero. Jesus shakes his head and says, "The sabbath was created to serve *us*, to restore us after our labor. Don't turn the gift of God into another burden, all right?"

It's still the sabbath when they get to the next town, so they go into the sabbath gathering place, which in Greek is called a *synagogue*. As always when Jesus goes to a synagogue, he's asked to teach, and as he talks he looks up to see a man with a withered hand. Everyone's watching. They've all heard about his healings. The scribes are watching, too, because if he *does* heal this man, that's like working on the sabbath. (You know: doctor's work.) Jesus sighs and looks at the scribes. "Tell me this, on God's sabbath, is it better to do good for people or do evil? Well?" No answer. Jesus glares at them angrily, then says to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretches it out. All the way. It's whole again, and the scribes can't say a thing. That's when they start planning Jesus' death.

Throngs follow Jesus everywhere, hanging on his every word, and if they can get close enough, hanging on his cloak. Everywhere he goes, he heals people: lepers, paralytics, lame people, people possessed by demons – and as we saw last week, the demons all seem to know him. They shout out, "You are the Son of God," but Jesus hushes them up at once. One day, though, he's able to get away from the crowds and takes a few of his closest followers up a mountain. There, Jesus chooses twelve of them to be his inner circle. There are the four fishermen, Simon and Andrew and James and John, and the tax-collector Levi, sometimes called Matthew. There's one named Philip, a Bartholomew, and a Thomas, There's a second James and a second Simon and a Thaddeus and named Judas Iscariot. You'll want to remember him.

Back down the mountain, the crowds come again. Jesus is stirring the dreams of the whole country. But that's not necessarily safe: Judea is a colony of Rome, and Rome doesn't like disturbances. So Jesus' family come looking for him. Actually, they think he's gone mad and come out to take him home – by force, if necessary. But they can't lay a finger on him through the crowds. Jesus just goes on casting out demons. The Jerusalem scribes – there always seems to be a few of those around now – say, "We know how he casts out demons. Because he has a bigger demon inside: *Beelzebub* himself!" Jesus shakes his head. "That's your theory? That

Satan's casting out Satan? A house divided against itself cannot stand. Satan's not at war with himself." Then Jesus' eyes grow hard. "But be careful, you scribes. When you get to the point where you can look at the transforming power of God and see only evil, there's no turning back. God can forgive any sin, any blasphemy you can utter. But willfully blinding yourself to God's power is a deeper blasphemy, it's blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and it puts you past forgiveness. Be careful."

At that point, someone in the crowd tugs on Jesus' sleeve. "Hey, Jesus! Your family are at the edge of the crowd looking for you." Jesus says, "No, my family's right in front of me. My family is anyone who hears the word of God, recognizes it, and does it."

Last week I said that Jesus' teaching wasn't like anyone else's. Let me show you. One day the crowds are so bad that Jesus grabs some of his fishermen and sends them to find a boat. He gets in, pushes out from the shore until he can breathe, then teaches all day. "God's kingdom is like this," he says. "It's like a man sowing seeds all over the place. Some of the seeds fall on the path, and birds come and eat them. Other seeds fall among the rocks, where the soil is shallow. They spring up fast but wither away just as fast. Other seeds fall in the thickets and briars, and they shoot up too, but they can't compete with the thorns for soil and water, so they shrivel up. But some seeds fall on rich, fertile soil, and they keep growing and produce fruit – thirty, sixty, a hundred times as much as they started with."

Later on he says, "God's kingdom is like this. It's like a mustard seed – tiny, almost invisible – but when it grows, it produces a bush big enough to shelter the birds and beasts." That's the sort of stuff I mean. He teaches all day in stories, mostly about ordinary things. When he finally finishes and gets away from the crowds, he asks his followers, "So did you understand all I taught today?" Long silence. "Did you understand *any* of what I taught today?"

Finally one of them says, "That one about the seeds that fall in different places. What did that mean?"

Jesus takes a breath, then says, "The seed is the good news of God, and it's scattered over all kinds of people. Some of them, it just bounces off, like seeds on a hard road. Other people hear the good news and get all excited, but they have no root in themselves, and so in a couple of weeks they've moved on and are getting excited about something else. Other people hear the good news and mean to keep it, but they're too stuck in the things of this world – worries about money and fame and power – and that stuff chokes the good news like thorns. But some people hear it and live it. Those people bear fruit – more than you can imagine."

They think about this for a moment, then one says, "Master? Why do you teach in stories? Why don't you just tell people what you mean plainly?"

Jesus looks at him and says, "I'm telling you."

That evening, Jesus says to his followers, "Let's go across the sea, to the Gentile lands." His followers don't understand. They're good Jews and they know perfectly well that Gentiles are unclean. But they get in the boat and start across. Jesus lies down and is asleep in seconds.

Well, storms come up fast on the Sea of Galilee, and this night there's a bad one. The twelve fight the storm for a long time, but Jesus still sleeps. Finally, they wake him up. "Teacher! Don't you even care that we're about to die?"

Jesus rubs his eyes and looks at the storm. "Hush," he says to the wind. "Be still." The wind stops. Jesus looks at the friends. "What's wrong with you? Don't you trust me?" They just stare at him. Who *is* this man? Jesus says, "Don't wake me up for little stuff, all right?"

It's daylight when they get to the Gentile side of the sea and land in a rocky area near the town of Gerasa. As soon as they land, though, a wild man comes out of the rocks. He's naked and covered with gashes where he's been cutting himself. His hair is wild, and he shrieks at them. "Go away! Go away, Jesus! I know you, Son of the Highest God! Leave me alone."

Jesus' friends step back but Jesus steps forward. "Who's talking? What's your name?"

A rasping voice bubbles out. "Call me Regiment, because there are a lot of us."

Jesus says, "I can't leave you alone. You got to get out of this man."

The raspy voice groans, then says, "Then, please, send us into that herd of pigs."

"Go, then," says Jesus. At once the man writhes and shouts and then is still. The pigs, feeding nearby, jump up as if they'd been hit, squeal, and then rush into the sea and drown. Jesus says to his friends, "Anyone have some clothes for this man?"

Before long, the people of the town have heard from the swineherds what happened and have come out to see Jesus. There he is, talking and sharing a meal with the man – now clothed and in his right mind – and the villagers beg Jesus to go away. Jesus nods.

"Can I go with you?" asks the man who used to be a regiment and now was one.

"No," says Jesus. "Go back to your own people. Tell them what God has done for you."

Then Jesus gets in the boat and heads back to the Jewish side, where the crowds are waiting. As he makes his way through the crowd, a man named Jairus appears. He's the leader of the local synagogue – not one of the Jerusalem leaders – and he kneels before Jesus and says, "Please, sir. My daughter. She's dying. Come quickly! Help her!"

Jesus raises him to his feet and they start at once, but just a moment later he stops in his tracks.

"What are you doing? Please! Hurry!"

"Someone rouched me," Jesus says.

His disciples just gape at him. “Of *course* someone did! Look at this crowd! Someone touched me, too. About a thousand, in fact.”

“Not like that. Someone *touched* me.”

“Please, sir. My daughter!”

Then an old woman steps forward, trembling. “I’m sorry, sir. It was me. I thought . . . I’ve been sick, bleeding, for twelve years. No one could help me, and I thought if I just touched your cloak. . . . I didn’t mean to disturb you. I’m so sorry.”

Jesus smiles at her. “See what I mean? She *touched* me. You are well now, because of your trust. Go in peace.”

But just then some men arrive, servants of Jairus. “It’s too late, master,” they say. “She’s gone.”

“Ssh,” says Jesus. “Just trust. Take me to her.”

They walk on, Jairus walking in the numbness of shock and grief. He mutters to himself, “She was only twelve years old. Just twelve years.”

At the house, there are already people downstairs mourning and carrying on. As he passes through, Jesus says, “Peace. Don’t mourn yet. She’s just asleep.” The people roll their eyes at him, but he only says, “Jairus, get your wife. Simon, James, John . . . come with me.” They go upstairs to the girl’s sleeping quarters, and Jesus takes her hand.

“*Talitha koum*,” he says, which is Aramaic for, “Get up, little girl.”

And she does. Jairus and his wife gasp, then rush to embrace her, weeping. Jairus cries out, “Thank you! Thank you! How can I repay you? What can I do for . . .?”

“Ssh,” Jesus says. “Ssh. I told you already. Just trust.”