

Jan 31.2021

Mark 1

At first glance our gospel today would appear to be a simple story about superstitious peasants who believe in demons.

You can write it off and move on “doing” church without wrestling with the actual story and working to discover the BIG TRUTH embedded in this story...but I wouldn't

Today the one who is called Jesus – the one JBar pointed to, the beloved one anointed by the Spirit, the one tested in the wilderness - starts his work by engaging in a power struggle with someone or something who clearly understands who Jesus is: he calls him the Holy One of God. Then we watch a power struggle as a demon controls one man – but from this moment, a cosmic battle is engaged.

Now you may think that there **are** no demons - and they have nothing to do with faith in Jesus. This story is telling us that following Jesus is really about life and death.

Jesus IS the power of life in our world; life which blossoms uniquely in each and every person, lifts all people, and struggles towards peace and contentment. Death, on the other hand, has lots of faces and results. Death ends our ability to give and to receive, to laugh, hope, love, create and build. Death is the power of destruction

Today a battle is engaged between the power of death which leads to fear and want and ultimately destruction and the power of life in Jesus that allows the man to flourish with room to breathe. We may not call these forces demons in modern times but just this month we have marked 400,000 dead from covid, we commemorated Yavashem, remembering the Holocaust which took 6 million lives and we watched as people crushed the skull of a police officer with a fire extinguisher. We know evil and death when we see it coming for us.

So we who call ourselves followers of Jesus, who look to him for mercy, healing and a path for our lives are called to align ourselves with the forces of life and not just for ourselves but for the whole cosmos. This will inevitably lead to battle with all those forces which divide to conquer, crushing others to retain power, hoarding resources, and demanding loyalty at the cost of body, soul and spirit.

So today, 'the game's afoot' as Jesus reveals who he is: he is God present with us and among us - bringing into reality God's ultimate plan for the cosmos. Therefore, for us to follow Jesus is to take up this battle.

Think back to the last baptism you witnessed: that simple ritual that marked one more follower of Jesus. In that sacrament, questions are asked and promises made.

Do you renounce all the forces that defy God?

Do you renounce the powers that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the ways of sin which draw you away from God?

Do you promise to work for peace and justice throughout the world?

Then with water you are baptized into the crucified and risen Jesus – who not only heals, feeds, forgives, but the one who conquered death and liberated all creation.

Jesus wasn't about abstract concepts; he took action. His actions defied religious norms and cultural traditions. He challenged all authorities, large and small who use their power to deny, defeat, ignore and destroy others.

Jesus ate with folks shunned by the other "good people". Jesus touched women and lepers and even the dead and in so doing healed their brokenness. Jesus invited enemies into fellowship because God values each created being who bears God's image. At the same time, Jesus had no use for any man-made structure that de-values and oppresses any person.

This is what God asks of us. This is the life Jesus invites us to enter. Throw off the chains of destructive systems and practices and multiply life and well-being: in yourself, your neighbors, your community and maybe even your country.

Where do we start living this liberated life begun in baptism? Start by asking questions: Who is not allowed to flourish, to move freely among us and contribute all they can?

Who is too hungry to think of anything but their next meal and How did they get into that predicament? We do the work of feeding well, but we need to dive deeper into the systems that keeps folks hungry.

Who can't find work? Why? What is keeping them outside the economy? Skills? Addictions? The Color of their Skin? Their command of English? How can we change that?

Who is struggling just to get by and needs a hand up? Affordable child care? Health insurance?

Think bigger. How am I a part of a system that benefits me in the short run but which destroys in the long run? How do we get clothes so inexpensive we are flooding landfills with our cast offs? What is the ultimate impact of all our plastic bottles? What will gasoline powered cars cost us in the long run?

Today's gospel reading is not just an ancient story about some superstitious peasants who believed in demons and one poor man.

This story is about Jesus' gift of life to each of us, AND Jesus' call to battle – for each of us to be a part of God's work liberating our world from the forces that destroy God's beloved creation and Jesus' beloved children.

Sometimes we forget why we need to pay attention to issues like economic inequity or racism or food insecurity. We forget why we should reach out to help complete strangers. In the waters of baptism you became a part of something much bigger than just you, and in the end, it's about life and death.

Today Jesus begins the work of liberating creation from the grip of death, and he is calling you to be a part of that work.