

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Salt Lake City, Utah
February 1, 2009 – 4th Sunday After Epiphany
Communion Sunday

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The action in this beginning part of Mark's gospel takes place at breakneck speed. The gospel's catch phrase is immediately, as in "immediately, Jesus did this." There is a sense of urgency here in communicating the activity of Jesus that demonstrates his divine mission not found in the other gospels. Mark seems to be in a hurry to let us know about this teacher from Nazareth, this Jesus.

Mark's account of the life of Jesus began with an account of the preaching of John the baptizing one. Then, the reader jumps immediately to the baptism of Jesus, followed by a brief mention of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the beginning of his Galilean ministry, and the calling of the first four disciples.

In today's reading, the action slows down a bit. Jesus and his new followers visit Capernaum. Jesus goes to the synagogue, I presume on the Sabbath, and teaches the people, though the gospel account does not tell us what he taught them.

Now, for something completely different, a man with an unclean spirit enters the worship space. We are told that the man shouts at Jesus, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus tells him to be quiet and casts the unclean spirit out of him.

As you can imagine, this encounter caught the attention of the people. Mark's gospel describes the reaction of the others who were there as being amazed by what happened. They were especially amazed by the power of Jesus' teaching. This incident secured Jesus' fame in the entire region.

In hearing this passage, I realize that it is hard for us, as people in the 21st century, to come to grips with encounters like these in the Biblical account, which involve unclean spirits or demons. We much prefer things to be in nice, neat, rational and logical packages. Incidents like this one described in Mark are neither nice and neat nor rational and logical and, thus, cause problems for us.

Since we do not like to be drawn into the pre-scientific worldview of the first century in which people saw demons and evil spirits inhabiting everything

they touched or saw, it is easy for us to dismiss these stories out of hand as having no truth in them and no relevance for us. Or, we are quick to gloss over what is described in the text as “unclean spirits” and give them a superficial, psychological interpretation, though we know that psychological problems, while very real, are not dealt with instantaneously, as this is. So, what do we do with this account? As we consider this passage, I want to focus on the man with the unclean spirit.

Here is a man who started out his Sabbath as he always had; he went to the synagogue. It was as a part of his normal routine that he encountered Jesus and experienced a touch of God’s grace. That is the part of the story that is most amazing to me. That is the miracle of grace.

It seems to me that most of us believe we have to be doing something extraordinary or be in some out of the ordinary place for God’s grace to be given to us. That is absolutely not the case.

It can be difficult for us to realize, but we can encounter God’s grace even in the mundane, the routine, and the ordinariness of our normal lives. That is what Kathleen Norris wrote about in her little book, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women’s Work*. Writing of doing laundry, housecleaning, caring for children, and baking bread among other things, Norris commented in summary, “Laundry, liturgy, and women’s work all serve to ground us in the world, and they need not grind us down. Our daily tasks, whether we perceive them as drudgery or essential, life-supporting work, do not define who we are as women or as human beings. But they have a considerable spiritual import, and their significance for Christian theology, the way they come together in the fabric of faith, is not often appreciated. But it is daily tasks, daily acts of love and worship that serve to remind us that religion is not strictly as intellectual pursuit, and these days it is easy to lose sight of that as, like our society itself, churches are becoming more politicized and polarized. Christian faith is a way of life, not an impregnable fortress made up of ideas; not a philosophy; not a grocery list of beliefs.”

That same insight is what Frederick Buechner wrote about in his book, *The*

Alphabet of Grace. He commented, “Part of what it means to believe in God, at least part of what it means for me, is to believe in the possibility of miracle, and because of a variety of circumstances I had a strong feeling at that moment that the time was ripe for miracle, and the very strength of the feeling itself seemed a kind of vanguard or miracle. Something was going to happen – something extraordinary that I could perhaps see and hear – and I was so nearly sure of it in retrospect I am surprised that by the power of auto-suggestion I was unable to make it happen. But the sunshine was too bright, the air too clear, some residual skepticism in myself too sharp to make it possible to imagine ghosts among the apple trees or voices among the yellow jackets, and nothing like what I expected happened at all. ... Because something other than what I expected did happen. Those apple branches knocked against each other, went clack-clack. No more. No less. ‘The dry clack-clack of the world’s tongue at the approach of splendor.’ And this is the substance of what I want to talk about: the clack-clack of my life. The occasional, obscure glimmering through of grace. The muffled presence of the holy. The images, always broken, partial, ambiguous, of Christ.”

Grace experienced in the normal routine of life, in caring for a loved one, and in the dry clatter of apple branches; that is the miracle of grace. The passage from Deuteronomy spoke of the marks of a true prophet. We see in the person of Jesus the Christ the one who brings us to that point of experiencing grace, which defines him as a true prophet of God. As we share in communion, we take the bread and the cup, both elements are ordinary things – normal things for our world. Yet, in them, we come close to the divine and grace fills those empty places in our souls.

Dear people of God, open your lives to the miracle of God’s grace and know of all that God offers to you. AMEN.