

January 31, 2021    Where do you go for a miracle?

This past week, it seems all I see on my nightly news show is stuff about Covid, over and over – vaccine delays, quarantine violations, skyrocketing exposures, new variants, travel restrictions, and so on. One night in particular, the WHOLE show was dismally only about Covid. Perhaps that's because it was the anniversary of the first Canadian case of Covid ever diagnosed. But it was depressing. At times like this, do you even try to believe in what some may call a miracle? And where would you go for a miracle? Do you charter a flight to the Yukon to jump the line and get a vaccine sooner? I think we've seen how that turned out. It's been a long year. But there is light and we are counting down months until they say "every Canadian who wants a vaccine will be vaccinated". We are all getting stir crazy, anxious for a sense of normalcy to return, yet we don't even know what that "new normal" will look like. However, I believe that miracles do happen – it's when our faith shows us goodness in the world and in ourselves and one another, and when change happens for the better.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus' public ministry begins in Capernaum, one of the few towns Mark associates with him, and the

disciples are present with him. Jesus begins by teaching in a synagogue, a place where a ready-made audience would be waiting. We don't know the content of his message, but his teachings are what make him sound like prophets, rather than the scribes of tradition. We do hear the people's reaction reflected astonishment because they recognized that Jesus was different because his teaching was different. It assumes a commission and authority from God that is in keeping with the conviction that the kingdom of God is near. The mercy of epiphany does indeed reveal God's goodness and today's Gospel reminds us that it simultaneously exposes and challenges even frightening and chaotic instances of evil.

The synagogue held a prominent role in the community and were central to "communal life: they functioned as courts and places for political discussions, storage of archives, education of children, public reading and teaching of Torah and prayer." (Eckhard J. Schnabel) It was natural and a customary practice to attend synagogue on the sabbath day for teaching, and no one seemed surprised that Jesus was teaching, it was the manner in which he taught and the lessons he gave that set him apart from the other rabbis in the community. The focus of this story in Mark's Gospel is on Jesus' power and authority. As a young teacher, Jesus might have been

expected to shore up his teaching with references to acknowledged authorities, but this was not his style.

The authority (exousia) that the audience recognizes probably consisted in the fact that Jesus did not explain Scripture with reference to other rabbis: he expounded the will of God with resolute immediacy. The teachers of the law (often translated as 'scribes') were professional experts in the Mosaic law who studied, explained and applied the law to specific situations. Jesus' approach was very different.

Jesus, as a Person of the Triune God, would not need to consult any human authority to bring truth to those listening to him. He spoke on the basis of his authority in a direct connection to those in front of him. Is it any wonder that they would be profoundly impacted by this encounter? It is not clear, however, if they were amazed at the teaching because it was extraordinary in itself or were they unaccustomed to bold, true, and prophetic teaching? Was Jesus teaching them something new that they had not heard or considered before? Did that make his teaching extraordinary? Or, had they become accustomed to safe and sanitized teaching that failed to challenge them or engage their imaginations?

If Jesus came to teach in our faith communities, would we simply be amazed at the presence of God? Or would we also hear messages we've never heard before because we have sanitized the good news for the fear that it would offend or divide? Has our concern that some do not want to hear it fully kept us from facilitating an encounter with the Holy One for those who are open and even desperate for a word from the Most High. Would we be taken aback by an encounter with Jesus?

In the laundry list above that delineated the roles of the synagogue, it reads more like a community centre than holy ground. Perhaps that is because the place as a physical location became more central than its purpose in the lives of the community of faith. What happens to our houses of worship when what we do there assumes more prominence than The One we are to encounter there?

As writer David Steindl-Rast offers: "Any place is sacred ground, for it can become a place of encounter with the divine Presence." The synagogue was built as a holy place like the temple before it and the various sanctuaries, meeting rooms, house churches, and other gathering places that have come after it. Designed as a place to be "with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation" (Psalm 111:1b),

it, like our holy places, assembles the community for purpose, nurture, formation...and healing. Hopefully, when Covid restrictions pass, and we can someday find a sense of new normalcy, we can return to our sacred places for use of gatherings, meetings, study, and radical new ideas.

While the laundry list of Jesus' time isn't a bad list, it also doesn't correspond to the list that Jesus referenced from the prophet Isaiah when he stood up to teach in the holy place on another occasion. That list he gave included bringing good news, binding up the broken, proclaiming liberty and release. The synagogue had disconnected from its mission, and so has so much of Christianity today. The Gospel according to Mark demonstrates the power of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. We bemoan the loss of people attending our services when the loss of people happened because the church isn't attending her mission. Parts of our mission have been displaced because Covid has inconvenienced us, disconnected us, challenged us, isolated us, and put up barriers we were never prepared for. It has challenged church leaders and community leaders. Mission all over our communities, not just in churches, have struggled. As a cluster, we have engaged in a relationship with a consultant to help us rediscover our mission and plans moving forward so that Christ's

mission can be alive and well among us, and bring us together working in vital ways in the community and together as congregations.

The Gospel according to Mark is all about mission. Racquel S. Lettsome writes, “This mission of love and justice in the world includes addressing ecological, moral, economic, and social ills. The focus is, therefore, communal, as relationships are of primary importance. However, it is not only human relationships that matter but also humanity’s relationship with all of creation.” There is work to do in the Kin-dom of God, and that concern is cosmic in scale rather than the individualistic focus that so much of the western church emphasizes. Mark presented a countercultural view of the gospel then and continues to gift us with it today.

Now, an unexpected character is introduced into the drama – “a man with an unclean spirit.” Today, an unclean spirit, or sin, can be characterized as a person suffering emotionally, socially, psychologically or spiritually. Whatever we might be tempted to imagine it is, Jesus encounters the chaos of the demonic in the synagogue and faces it head on, to heal it.

In the midst of his teaching, a man with an unclean spirit interrupts him and identifies Jesus as the “Holy One of God.” The presence of the man is not surprising: the world was believed to be inhabited by spirits, which were mainly malevolent in nature. Both Judaism and the pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world saw the need for people to be freed from the power of unclean spirits/demons. In Judaism, the presence of unclean spirits symbolized the struggle between God and the forces of evil. Therefore, it is ironic that the people who are supposed to be on the side of God, namely, the religious leaders and members of the congregation, are not the first characters in Mark’s narrative to recognize who Jesus really is. Instead, it is the unclean spirit who knows what the people of God do not. Jesus responds by silencing and removing the demon with a verbal command, thereby confirming the audience’s original assessment of his authoritative teaching. His is a “performative utterance.” Jesus speaks and things happen; demons obey.

It appears that it is the unclean spirit speaking to Jesus, but it is not clear who brought them into the synagogue. Was it the man seeking Jesus or simply entering a holy place and encountering Jesus? Perhaps he was as surprised at finding Jesus there as the others were amazed at the teachings of Jesus. Maybe, it was the spirit leading the man toward this

confrontation with Christ. Whatever the case, it was clear that in this story (remember, perhaps not fact but instead metaphor) an exorcism needed to take place to free the man from the hold that evil had over him. The demand to come out, quickly follows and the unclean spirit is excised. The man is healed. A miracle takes place. The Kin-dom of God is on earth.

James LaGrande tells us that an exorcism is a form of healing. The unclean spirit exerts control over the human being—mind, body, and soul. That influence is at odds with a liberating God who came, in no small part, to set the captive free. That work is central to the gospel and to restore God's vision for humanity. Jesus' command for that demon to come out is an early demonstration of the Kin-dom of God staking a flag on earth. The territory claimed was not Capernaum or even the synagogue but on the person being possessed. In this act, Jesus reclaims the holy place of humanity. What do we need to do to reclaim our holy places in our hearts and lives and spaces? What does our personal Kin-dom look like?

This event takes place in a holy place—a synagogue. But it also takes place in another holy place—within the human body. What has been profaned by evil has been made righteous by Emmanuel—God With Us. And, in this particular instance, we see healing take place alongside

teaching. After Jesus astounds with his teaching, he provides an even greater demonstration of his authority through this miraculous act of deliverance. What if our worship – communal and private – included making space for miracles to take place? What if our ministry and mission were framed in the expectation of the miraculous?

We are living in a time in need of the miraculous...in need of healing. Of course, healing needs repair – that laundry list that Jesus recited in another holy place. In a time when the world continues to struggle against a pandemic, where nations are called to confront the pervasive evil of white supremacy and nationalism, where healing can only take place when evil is confronted, silenced, and cast out.

The church is called to do that work, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and as partners with Christ in the restoration of the world. We are not free to abandon our human siblings; we are called to participate in their healing and call upon divine intervention to discover and experience miracles in our everyday lives. Amen.