

NO SANCTUARY IN THE SANCTUARY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 29, 2006

Scripture: Psalm 96; Mark 1:21-28

It was a typical Sabbath, nothing particularly significant about it, really. People went to the synagogue for the usual services, the reading of the Torah, perhaps a bar mitzvah was on the schedule that day. We don't know for sure. Mark makes it sound pretty ordinary actually. "They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught."

He had just called Peter and Andrew, James and John if you have been following the story from last week. Jesus' public ministry is in its earliest stages, and it starts in the little fishing village of Capernaum, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

I have been there before, in what is left of that synagogue. Probably not the one in which Jesus taught, but its successor, ancient enough, built around the fourth or fifth century on the foundations of the earlier synagogue; and I read the story there that we read today and imagined the people sitting on the stone benches that are still there, and the worship service that was disrupted by a man with an unclean spirit.

You don't expect that sort of thing, disruption in the synagogue like that. You come for worship all polished, clean and neat, ready to go to brunch afterwards, and you expect to sit with other people who are clean and neat and well behaved. You know the basic etiquette, you don't take pictures, you don't act like tourists and walk around like you're at St. Pat's or something like that while the service is going on. You turn off your cell phone, and your Blackberry, and shut out the world. You sing the hymns, you listen politely, you maybe even drift off to sleep during the sermon, I know that's hard to imagine, but it happens. (I can see everything up here.)

We think of church as restful, predictable, too, the way most of us like our worship. Nothing ever changes here. Maybe you've heard that light bulb joke about *how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb*. And the answer is "Change!?!"

We hear the story of the healing of the man with the unclean spirit as an example of Jesus' compassionate heart and healing power, and in doing so, perhaps overlook the *disruption* in the service. I mean, this was a lovely little congregation of simple fishing families. They had a nice synagogue there. No doubt plenty of volunteers to sweep out the pews after the services, folks to dust the bema, and polish the ark where the Torah was kept, maybe an altar guild to maintain the oil in the lamps, a modest budget approved each year at the annual meeting. A nice little synagogue.

Comfortable, predictable. Until that day when Jesus came and the man with the unclean spirit wandered in. It was a typical Sabbath day the way it started, and Jesus taught that day. Nothing unusual there. Worship in the synagogue involved reading scripture and lively debate about the meaning of the law and the prophets.

Jesus was a good teacher, from all we hear. Mark says he taught as one having authority, not like their scribes. He tells us that the crowd there in that synagogue were

astonished at what he said. And wouldn't you have given anything to have been there that day? To sit at *his* feet and hear *him* teach?

The scholars say that it was not just his silken tones that they noticed. Not just his ability to tell a story, or to turn a phrase. It was his commanding sense of speaking from conviction that got their attention. Morna Hooker, a New Testament scholar at Cambridge says that the authority of Jesus was “unique, and totally unlike that of anyone else. It [had] not been given to him by any human agency... [but] from God.¹ And even in a little town like Capernaum people could identify the real thing.

Later they would notice it in Jerusalem as well, and it would cost Jesus dearly. But in Capernaum, it was a man possessed with a demon that first confronted that authority with which Jesus taught.

It happens sometimes, someone odd wanders into the sanctuary. The ushers leave the doors open and somebody who is barely functioning comes in and starts acting strangely. Someone hands out little notes scribbled on tiny paper at the gate after the service telling of the coming doom. Or some poor raggedy soul wanders around the vestibule, hungry and tapping people on the shoulder, asking for food or money.

My mentor Edmund Steimle used to love to tell the story of preaching in a church in South Carolina one Sunday morning. He was a pretty earthly preacher and he was working on the story of Rahab in the Book of Joshua, a practitioner in the world's oldest profession. I think Steimle had just called her a harlot when a very proper woman stood up in the congregation and said, “Young man, you need to have your mouth washed out with soap.”

It happens sometimes, some odd thing, some odd person does something that you have to just stop and address. I remember my friend Joanna Adams preaching at the Worship and Music Conference a few years ago at Montreat, and a woman had an attack of some sort and 2000 of us in worship just stopped while this woman slumped and collapsed in the pew. They called the paramedics, it took time, we waited. Joanna prayed, she prayed for that woman, for her health and recovery, for her family, that she not be afraid, that we all not be afraid, it was a long prayer, and we waited patiently, until finally the paramedics came and treated the woman and took her to the hospital.

The point is, when you open the doors of the church, life in all its forms and with all its complexity comes barging into the sanctuary, and it always tends to surprise us doesn't it? Real frustrations, phobias, fits and fears in the sanctuary.

It shouldn't surprise us though. The only way to keep the sanctuary quiet and peaceful would be to keep it locked and empty. In reality, once the doors are open there is no sanctuary in the sanctuary. Every human need can come in the door, every fear can take a seat in the pew, every broken spirit can come in and cry, every rejected heart can take a place, sinners may sit next to saints, the virtuous next to the virtueless, the disturbed next to the peaceful in spirit.

I often think that while many come here for solace and peace of mind, quiet and reassurance, others we barely notice come ready for spiritual warfare to do battle with the demons, to fight a sweaty, hard, and agonizing battle of the soul and we just don't realize it, we are so buttoned up and good at masking our own spiritual turmoil.

I shall never forget a young man whom I had watched grow up in the church. He was a handsome kid, a member of the youth fellowship. He got a scholarship to college but flunked out his first year. He came home, got a job, couldn't keep it. He had gotten involved with cocaine among other things and developed a habit that he couldn't shake. He went to rehab and it was a tough time for him.

He showed up in church one day, and at the door after the service he told me he had spent the whole hour, while the hymns were being sung, while I was preaching, while the prayers were being said, he could only think of one thing: that just two blocks from the church he could score.

There is no sanctuary in the sanctuary. We think of it as a place of peace, but it is also a place of war, where life and death, meaning and meaninglessness, hope and despair are in contention with one another.

One of the things that I sometimes ponder is the fact that late in the first year that I was here, an older member, a woman I had gotten to know only somewhat, and yet who seemed to be just fine took her own life. She was a person I liked very much and about whom I had no inkling that she was so depressed. No one else seemed to recognize her despair either.

But I still think about her eyes, and the way she often looked at me and at others here at church, as if there was a depth of the soul, a yearning that I did not see for what it was. I'm not sure that I would have made a difference in her life had I known how mightily she wrestled with the demons of despair, but I feel badly that I did not know that that was what she was doing out there in the pew each Sunday, battling mightily.

Every Sunday there are people who crowd into this sanctuary who are struggling with important issues in their life. The stresses of work, the challenges of raising children, the temptations that kids face at school, the enticement of violating the promises we have made to those we love, the responsibility of providing care for a partner who is ill, and the mistakes and failures in our lives that do not let us go. There is no sanctuary in the sanctuary, even though there is sometimes rest from the stresses of life, even if just for awhile. Faith is not meant to be an escape from life, but rather a means for equipping us to meet it, in whatever way it comes. Which is, I suppose what we know instinctively, and what keeps us coming back. Strength to contend with what we do.

Those are our personal struggles, and sometimes in the sanctuary the church itself must contend with its own faults and failures.

On May 4, 1969 James Forman walked down the center aisle of the Riverside Church and presented a Black Manifesto demanding \$500,000,000 in financial reparations for white complicity in the plight of African American people in this country going all the way back to slavery. It set off a firestorm of reaction among church leaders in this city and around the nation, and it made obvious that even in the sanctuary the world breaks in and disrupts the usual.

Some people thought what Foreman did was nothing but disruptive and destructive, madness of a sort. Others, in retrospect, realized that even in church voices crying for justice break in, even in disordered ways, even when it is impolite and dismantles the order of the day.

I think of the demonstrations of ACT-UP, first inside the church, and then on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral in this city, people driven to clamor and disorder, so unresponsive had the church been to the suffering of a generation of men and women disappearing with AIDS, until finally voices were raised demanding that silence equaled death.

We like the sanctuary to be a place of respite and peace, a familiar and comfortable place where we can shut out the world. And it is a sanctuary, peaceful, quiet. You should see it on a weekday afternoon with the lights out and the light streaming through these windows on the South Side of the transept. But ever since Jesus taught at the synagogue in Capernaum, the sanctuary has also been a place of spiritual confrontation, not just where the afflicted are made comfortable, but also where the comfortable are afflicted.

Here the demons that bedevil our lives are known by name, and if the story at Capernaum is to be trusted, here, as well, the demons know the name of the One before whom all fall silent.

That is the good news inherent in this story. That God is here, that the authority and power of Jesus still amazes us sometimes, and that the healing that was performed at Capernaum can happen here as well.

Jesus taught the good people of Capernaum that day in the synagogue that scripture and faith cannot be removed from the world in which it is to be lived, and worship is much more than we thought, not just the private nourishment of hungry souls, the individualistic salvation of the singular person. Worship also engages the world as well, and invites its healing, confronting the powers of this age and naming them for what they are.

And because he is here, there is no sanctuary in the sanctuary. For all of the stained glass windows and inspiring architecture, the grand music of the choir and glory of the organ, the high and lofty pulpit and the soaring arches above us this is both a place of inspiration and beauty as well as a field hospital in the midst of a theater of engagement where just about anybody may come in, wounded or bleeding, sane or insane, possessed or of sound mind, and seek wholeness. Maybe even the brokenness of this warring, contentious, hell bent era in which we live can find healing here.

For the promise is that here in this place, with bandages and ointments ready, at the table and at the font, in prayer and in the laying of hands, in preaching and teaching, in scripture and song and silence, there is healing and even peace.

Here the demons are named and cast out. Here the broken in spirit are made strong again. Here the tears of those who weep are dried. Here the powers of this world, the princes and potentates and presidents with all their weapons and armies and threats are put on notice that there is one before whom all are called to kneel in reverence, The Prince of Peace who is sovereign over all. And here, those who are hungry to know God and to see God wait with patience and listen with hope to sit at the feet of Jesus whose word still astonishes, for he teaches with authority and even the unclean spirits obey him.

So may our worship be always like that.

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¹ Morna Hooker, **The Gospel According to St. Mark**. Black's New Testament Commentaries, General Editor, Henry Chadwick. London: Hendrickson, 1991. 61.