

## JANUARY 28<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 I Corinthians 7:32-35 Mark 1:21-28

The first miracle Jesus works in each gospel is very significant. The evangelist deliberately chooses it not only to set the tone for his whole gospel, but to especially tell us what we, as other Christs, should be doing to imitate the person whose ministry we're carrying on. That's certainly the case with today's Marcan pericope.

There's more to Jesus exorcising a demoniac than might appear at first glance. Jesus' earthly contemporaries thought demons were the source of more than just moral evils. Besides sins, they caused all sorts of sicknesses and other physical and psychological evils. If it's bad, a demon must somehow be behind it.

No telling exactly what kind of demon possessed the man in the Capernaum synagogue on that fateful Saturday. But it was sharp enough to realize that Jesus of Nazareth was intent on "destroying us" one demon at a time. In other words, Mark's Jesus conceived of his ministry as a force to eradicate evil.

That means we who follow him and are committed to carrying on his work are expected to buy into his dream. Before anything else, we, like him, should be destroyers of evil, no matter how or where we encounter it. We need only read the rest of Mark's gospel to see how he accomplishes this step by step, until at the end he completely gives himself and eventually comes back as a totally new creation.

The problem in getting rid of evil is two-fold. How do we know what evil to attack, and how do we eradicate it? Today's first reading supplies us with the first answer: prophets.

Our biblical authors presume a person of faith can't get by without prophets in his or her life. They're the community's conscience. That's why Yahweh's people panic when Moses – the prophet par excellence – is about to die. How will they continue to know what Yahweh wants them to do?

Though some interpret Yahweh's promise to raise up another "prophet like (Moses) from among their kin" as applying to just one special, specific prophet, the original readers of Deuteronomy seem to have interpreted the promise as Yahweh's guarantee that there will always be other prophets in their lives. God won't let them fly blind.

Not being biblically oriented, many of us believe Jesus simply set up an institution – the Roman Catholic Church – which tells us through its infallible decrees what God wants of us, pointing out which evils to exterminate. Certainly we should expect the church to be prophetic, but what happens when the evil we encounter actually comes from the church? The late Carroll Stuhlmueller often mentioned that throughout history the community's prophets have rarely been members of the hierarchical structure. It's possible a pope or bishop could be a prophet – e.g. Pope Francis – but prophecy usually isn't one of their gifts. Carroll was convinced the prophets God sends are almost always "outsiders." That's why it's essential to know the classic five (or six) rules for separating real prophets from fake prophets. (Another day, another commentary.)

Though the institution rarely is prophetic, it does have a role. After prophets surface the evils to be destroyed, institutional administrators should point out the practical ways to eradicate them. Carroll was convinced prophets make lousy administrators. When put in administrative positions, prophets will quickly frustrate everyone around them. That's not their gift.

Paul, for instance, in today's second reading, prophetically points out that the risen Jesus wants us free from anxieties. Most Christians today, though, wouldn't agree with his "celibacy conclusion" as a way to accomplish such tranquility. It might have made sense when the Parousia was thought to be just around the corner, but 2,000 years later . . . .

We need both prophets and administrators.

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## FEBRUARY 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Job 7:1-4, 6-7    I Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23    Mark 1:29-39

Biblical fundamentalists have a huge problem when they hear one biblical author disagree with another biblical author. Among other places, that happens both in the bible's "wisdom debate," and in today's three liturgical readings.

The sacred writers who composed our "wisdom literature" – e.g. Proverbs, Sirach, Song of Songs, Job, Wisdom, etc. – clash theologically on the most basic question of wisdom: can we surface patterns of God's behavior or not? The author of Proverbs says, "Yes." We need simply look around us and we'll see God's patterns in ourselves and nature. On the other hand, the author of Job says, "No." No matter how carefully we look, we can never find God working logically in our lives.

Today's passage from Job shows at least one result for searching for a God we'll never understand. There's no method to God's actions, nor a pattern to how God treats us. That means for many, life ends up being a "drudgery." "My days," Job reflects, "are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; they come to an end without hope." There's no doubt on which side of the cup "half/full, half/empty" dilemma Job comes down upon.

Yet at least on this point, our Christian sacred authors take their focus from God's actions and zero in on ours. Today's passages from Paul and Mark, for instance, tell us striving to be other Christs that we should never just sit back and grade God working in our lives. What are we doing in the meantime?

In both their theologies, the secret to having interesting, exciting lives is to practice "*hesed*."

*Hesed* is a Hebrew biblical term for going beyond what's expected of us. No one can fault us for doing only what's necessary. *Hesed*, on the other hand, is a surprise; a total free action.

Paul, in our I Corinthians pericope, tells us he has "an obligation to preach the gospel." He has no other choice. It's *how* he preaches the good news that provides him with a "recompense" – in two ways. First, though he can expect at least room and board from those he evangelizes, he goes beyond their expectations, "offering the gospel free of charge," an obvious act of *hesed*.

Second, nowhere does the risen Jesus insist Paul actually identify with those to whom he proclaims the gospel. Yet beyond everyone's expectations, the Apostle makes himself "a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all . . ." Unlike many of us priests and ministers, he becomes one with those to whom he ministers. He's not just a preacher standing apart from his "audience."

Jesus amazes his disciples in today's gospel passage. After his first day of ministry, they presume he's returning to Capernaum and picking up where he left off the night before. In less than 24 hours, he's become a local hero. Being members of his inner circle, they've already lined up TV and radio interviews and even contacted the local papers.

But he says, "Pack up! We're leaving town!" He's planning to travel to other villages and other synagogues, preaching the word to people who probably won't be as open to the good news as those in Capernaum. As long as he stays put, he's playing it safe.

No doubt on Good Friday evening those who were anxious to get him to return to town that morning muttered something to the effect, "He went one synagogue too far."

Had Jesus gone no further than Capernaum, he eventually would have died peacefully in bed, his family and friends around him, but we would never have heard of him, or *hesed*.