

“Believing in What God Can Do”
Mark 6:1-13
Sunday, July 12, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

A fellow had been stranded on a desert island for 20 years. Finally, he saw a modern cruise ship which had anchored unusually close to shore in order to permit a little snorkeling. Catching someone's attention, the man was taken on board. After getting himself cleaned up and dressed, he was invited to the captain's table for dinner.

“So,” asked the captain, “how did you manage to survive by yourself all those years?” The castaway pointed at the porthole and said: “By the grace of God. You see those three huts out there on the beach?”

“I see them,” said the captain. “You must spend a lot of time in them.”

“That's right,” said the beach bum. “In the middle hut I live, cook my fish and sleep in a hammock that I made for myself. The hut on the right is where I go to church. Never miss a Sunday. I celebrate Christmas and Easter, give myself communion once a month, and even hold a revival every other year. That's why I've been able to survive so long ... by attending church regularly.”

“Amazing,” said the captain. “So what about the hut on the left?”

“Oh, that's where I used to go to church.” (William A. Ritter)

Before I get into our reading from the Gospel of Mark, I want to say a few things out loud. I want to be frank with you...

Some folks are here today to check me out. Some of you here today are wondering about a few things.

You are wondering about this new pastor person: Will she be there for us when we need her? Or will she be too busy to care?

You are wondering: Will her sermons be sleep-inducing? Or will her preaching be fun, engaging and meaningful for us?

You are wondering: Will she force unwanted changes on us? Or will she love us as we are, get to know us, and gently accompany us as we allow God to change us?

You are probably wondering a lot of other things; I'm just naming a representative sample.

It may surprise you to know that I am also checking you out. I also have some wonderings.

I am wondering: Will you expect me to be all things to all people? Or will you receive with joy the particular gifts I bring?

I am wondering: Will you expect me to be available around the clock, seven days a week? Or will you encourage regular time for me to be with my family and regular time for me to rest and replenish myself for the ministry we share?

I am wondering: Will you expect me to grow the church single-handedly, with no change required on your part? Or will you participate passionately with me, to expand the kingdom of Jesus Christ in this place? Will you define growth by numbers only? Or will you celebrate with me as we grow spiritually together?

We do not know the answers to these questions yet. We will have to see where God is taking us on this leg of the journey of faith. To start, we bring our wonderings to Jesus, and we ask him to build a good, strong relationship out of our questions. We bring our human weakness, and we ask Jesus to help us become more together than we could ever be alone. We ask Him to

strengthen us as the expression of His Church in this place.

I. Jesus appalled by their disbelief (v. 6).

Jesus lived close to failure. In today's lesson, he speaks in Nazareth, his hometown. He has just come from performing great miracles – calming the wild storm at sea; healing the frightening man at Gerasene; restoring Jairus' daughter to life and health.

He also comes from his preaching experience at Capernaum, where the people are astonished by his teaching and respond with respect.

Now, in Nazareth, his hometown, the people are again astonished by his teaching – but they respond with offense. Who is he, this local carpenter's son, to speak with such authority to them?

They do not believe in him, and he is unable to do any mighty works among them.

“Somewhere we have imbibed the heady notion that if we sow love and compassion in our community, we will reap love and compassion...Jesus sowed love and compassion, and he reaped death on a cross,” says one scholar (Leonard Sweet).

Anthony de Mello tells the story of an old farmer who had an old horse for tilling. One day the horse escaped into the hills. When all the farmer's neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?” Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the

farmer's son with his broken leg they let him off. Now was that good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?

Jesus has bad luck in Nazareth, or so it appears. He could “do no deed of power there,” because of the unbelief of the people. He is, in fact, “amazed at their unbelief; appalled by their disbelief” (v. 6).

II. Jesus sends out the Twelve two by two (v. 7).

And yet, in the next instant, he is sending out the disciples, 2 x 2, with authority! They are given the authority to preach, heal and cast out demons. They are given authority to carry on Jesus’ ministry in his absence.

Jesus, knowing what failure looks like, gives the disciples a sacrament of failure for their journey. When they are rejected, shake off the dust. Their mission is wildly successful, perhaps because they obey Jesus. Jesus’ power and authority are symbolized in the cross, a symbol of failure to the world, but a symbol of salvation to those who know him and follow him. Jesus sends his disciples out in the power of his authority, knowing they will sometimes fail, and giving them a means to deal with it: Shake off the dust! Leave it with God! Keep moving!

In his sermon to the graduates of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, theologian Paul Tillich preached on the theme of healing, casting out demons, and leading people to faith. He told the graduating seminarians that they would experience difficulties as they went to their new parishes with this message of healing, casting out demons, and repentance. Why would there be difficulties? Many people say that they do not need to be healed; many laugh at the absurdity of casting out demons that rule their lives; and many reject the idea of their need to trust in Christ for salvation. “Therefore,” Tillich said, “the first task of the minister is to make people aware of their predicament” (Ron Lavin).

Closing.

As we come to the Table this morning, may we be aware that Jesus, who is appalled by our disbelief, nevertheless sends us out, two by two, giving us authority to proclaim the gospel, to cast out evil, and to heal the sick.

I invite you to bring to His Table all that you are and all that you hope to be. Claim the authority he gives to everyone who chooses to follow him.

God can do great things in you.

Amen.