

Psalm 84
Mark 3: 19a-30
June 10, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This morning we hear two scriptures which on the surface couldn't be more different. Psalm 84 is the song of faithful pilgrims ascending the high hill on which sits the holy city of Jerusalem. Within that city is the holiest place--the temple of Solomon. This song evokes the joy of people who have traveled many miles to arrive at their true spiritual home—the place where God dwells with human beings.

On the other hand the passage from Mark presents a scene of chaos. Jesus has come home. His healings and teachings and casting out of demons have spread his fame far and wide. He is a phenomenon. His attacks on the practice of the institutional religion of the time have brought the experts on the Law of Moses all the way from Jerusalem to Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee to refute and discredit him. His own family has arrived believing Jesus to be, literally, *beside himself*. They believe Jesus has lost contact with reality. They want to rescue him from his fans and also from the scribes who want to arrest him. The place where Jesus is staying is packed to overflowing. Jesus and his disciples are backed against the wall. There is no room to move. Imagine the atmosphere! It is a volatile mix of crazy expectation, fear and hostility. How far we have come from the blissful vision of the pilgrims!

Jesus' mother and brothers are not concerned with his claim to be a prophet sent from God. They are afraid he has gone off the rails. He needs to return to the bosom of the family and regain his senses. Maybe they think that going back to his father's carpentry business in

Nazareth and being matched with a good stable local girl will restore him to the son and brother they remember.

The scribes are zealous to protect the true interpretation of the practice of the Law of Moses and the stability it has given to Jewish life for centuries. Judaism is a reasonable religion based on clear moral and ethical laws. The Law of Moses is the basis for maintaining a stable community in good times and bad until the messiah comes. That the crowds are coming to believe that Jesus *is* the messiah is dangerous and must be proved false in the strongest terms.

But the crowds have come because for the first time they have experienced God alive in their midst. He has brought a sister back from the brink by a terminal disease. He has restored a child who was overcome by a demon. He has cured a man of leprosy and fed large crowds from a few morsels of food. He teaches as one who has true spiritual authority; that is, he teaches not out of a desire to be right or impose his will on people but out of love. His family may call him insane. The scribes may call him possessed. What matters to the crowd are the results. The response of man born blind in the Gospel of John says it all: "Whether this man is a sinner I know not. What I do know is that once I was blind and now I see."

This entire episode has a contemporary ring. For years Christianity has been the cultural glue which has held western culture together. Yet in the 21st century Christianity has ceased to be a coherent and reasonable explanation of life for vast multitudes of humanity. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell have lost their power to keep human behavior in check. The belief in a violent and apocalyptic end to the world is dismissed as an ancient fantasy. We who are practicing Christians are viewed as either deluded and out of touch with reality or

subversive forces leading enlightened society back to the dark ages of prejudice and superstition.

The new scribes and Pharisees come from within the faith and without. They come from those who are more concerned with biblical authority than divine love and compassion. These are not exclusively those we denounce as narrow fundamentalists—and mean conservative Christians. There are liberal fundamentalists who are more interested in identifying who is on the right and wrong side of the issues, what is the correct language to be used, and what hymns are theologically correct. Both ends of the spectrum have the attitude that the person who is not with us completely is against us.

And now there is a third group who have placed their utter faith in science to eventually explain everything, including, as Stephen Hawking predicted, the mystery of God. They take it for granted that the God of revealed religion is a purely human attempt to make sense of the world. It is a fantasy born of the creature's fear of being so small in a huge and terrifying universe. Religion is an attempt to impose order on our fear of primal chaos. It served its purpose but now has been shown to be as Freud asserted, "an illusion", a form of childish wish fulfillment. The persistence of religion represents the last gasp of the forces of ignorant resistance to the light of scientific truth.

In response to science and rationalism, Christianity has tried to make faith reasonable—compatible with philosophy and science. In doing so it has lost its witness. We have tried to harmonize biblical creation with the theory of evolution. We have psychologized the fall of Adam and Eve. We have lent biblical injunctions for the use of both conservative and liberal political ideologies to the point where we no longer know where one ends and the other

begins. We have turned the resurrection into butterflies and the coming of spring. We have confused nuclear annihilation with biblical prophecy. In trying to make Christianity reasonable we have lost the soul of the faith.

Friends, I propose to you that the power of Christian faith lies not in being compatible with modern science and rationality. As Stephen Asma writes in a recent article in the New York Times, "I do not intend to try to rescue religion as reasonable. It isn't terribly reasonable. But I do want to argue that its irrationality does not render it unacceptable, valueless or cowardly. Its irrationality may even be the source of its power."

I would go further. I would say that it was the *refusal* of Jesus to be compatible with the world that made him visible. It was the *wildness* of his teaching and disregard for the stable world of religion and culture that gave hope to those who were invisible in the social/religious status quo. It was his utterly irrational willingness to die for the redemption of humanity and the scientifically ridiculous resurrection from the dead that shattered the settled view of life and opened the possibility of a meeting of the Creating Power of the Universe and finite mortal humanity. It is what caused the crowds to create a messy chaotic scene where he lived in Capernaum.

It is what has kept me on a spiritual journey of a lifetime and brought us together for the shortest and best thirteen years of my life.

Most of all it is my prayer that the power of irrationality will give you a spiritual vitality that cannot help but spill out into the world. Amen.