

**Deuteronomy 18: 15-20**  
**Mark 1: 21-28**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**January 29, 2012**

Many of you have heard me say that life is never clearer than when we are in a state of despair. When we are in the depths of despair there is no purpose in life, there is no meaning, there is no God. There is no reason to exert any effort to improve our lives, why bother? This precarious spiritual state is usually the result of depression; however it can also be a state of real spiritual crisis. I encountered the spiritual crisis form of despair when, soon after my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday I realized with absolute clarity that God did not exist and that life was utterly meaningless. This was not a disturbing realization. In fact, there were no feelings at all. As I led worship services, funerals, weddings, led prayers to the non-existent God my only thought was this: If after a year I *still* do not believe in God, I should probably find another line of work. Since I am good for little else than to be a minister, it was a relief when, soon after my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, my faith in God returned.

Yet whether it is depression, a spiritual crisis or the accumulated mountain of overwhelming life, or wrenching grief, we sometimes reach a point where it makes perfect sense to give up. Indeed, I saw a bumper sticker which announced, "I used to suffer; and then I gave up hope and felt better."

So I say again: life is never clearer than when we are in a state of despair. This why, ever since the beginning the Christian faith has seen despair as spiritual enemy number one. It is why those who take the notion of an active evil presence have identified Satan's ultimate goal

as promoting human despair. When we give up on ourselves and our lives we will come to give up on God. The power of the devil wins.

Thank fully, while most of us have had moments and even prolonged periods of depression and deep spiritual doubt, we have emerged from the darkness to fight another day. We have found reasons enough to get out of bed and to live. We have found that with patience, love and support from family and friends and sometimes the help of a doctor who prescribes appropriate medication, that the so called clear reality is actually an illusion. Reality, while often conflicted and confusing and discouraging is also joyful, renewing and beautiful. Life is worth the trouble of living.

Yet on any given Sunday we come with a bundle of struggles. It is possible to be generally ok and yet discouraged, even in despair, about significant areas of our lives. There are areas where we have given up; that is, made our peace with the fact that whatever the instance may be—our jobs, our health, our significant relationships, our addictive behaviors—will never change. We become resigned and settle for lives of low expectations so that we cannot be disappointed.

I assume that you are here this morning because you want to hear a different message. You do not want the minister to tell you to say that your life is hopeless. You do not want your religion to be a kind of spiritual hospice where you receive comfort care with spiritual anesthetics until you die and go to heaven. I am banking on the fact that you come to worship in part to be assured that, not only is life worth living in general, but *your life is worth living*.

What I am talking about, and what I propose is the key to understanding today's scripture from Mark's Gospel is one simple word: hope, the antidote to despair.

I propose to you that the man in the synagogue was not a deranged individual. The demon in him was despair. I propose to you that this man had been worshipping at the synagogue for years. He had made his peace with the half life he was living and was putting in his time until he died. He looked like every other man and no one thought there was anything unusual about him. Then comes the day when the young preacher from Nazareth comes and speaks. Something awakens in the man. It is a deep stirring. It is unsettling. It is upsetting his carefully crafted equilibrium. As the preacher from Nazareth goes on these feelings intensify and become painful to the point that he can no longer keep them in. A voice cries out from him, "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!" The preacher turns to the man and seeing his anguish speaks to the demon we are calling despair and calls it out.

Friends, the older I get, the more I believe that the mission of Jesus Christ is the mission of hope. He comes to awaken in us the awareness that life is infinitely more vital and beautiful than we can ever imagine. He comes to awaken in us an expectation that if we follow him and truly trust our lives to his care that we will be seeing and doing things even a year from now that we could never imagine. But this hope comes at a cost. We must give up our despair. We must allow the Holy Spirit of God to create a holy dissatisfaction with all of our concession and to inspire us to aspire to wholeness of soul. To do this we need each other to hold the hope before us when we falter and to stand with us when we make difficult but hope filled decisions. We need to be alert and ready when someone needs the same support from us. May we become a community where the power of Jesus Christ casts out the demon despair and fills all who come with hope! Amen.