

Sermon: The Sacred and The Sacrilegious**Scripture: Mark 1:21-28****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 31, 2021**

You know the Gospel of Mark doesn't start with a birth story. It starts with a wild man in the wilderness and Jesus already an adult leaves the city of Nazareth and goes out to the wilderness, asks the wild man John to baptize him and then goes further out and into the deeper wilderness where he is tempted, it says by Satan, and tended to by angels. As he's coming back into the civilized world from the wilderness he calls a few disciples to follow him and then the first place he goes is to a sacred place – a synagogue in Capernaum – on a sacred day, the sabbath.

The term sacred comes from the Latin word “sacrare” which means “to set apart or to distinguish as holy” to consecrate, has that same root word. The bone at the base of our spine is called a sacrum because it was that bone in particular that was offered up to the gods in animal sacrifices, there's that root word again, believing it to be a particularly central and strong bone above all the others. A saint is a person who is set apart as holy, same root, and as I mentioned in the Time for the Young, sanctuary comes from that word as well, a space set apart as holy and safe.

In many religions but particularly in Judaism during the time leading up to Jesus' coming onto the scene, sacred space and sacred time and sacred people were all set apart and made holy by keeping them clean and free of contaminants. The scripture from Ezekiel that Jerry read points to this – “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be made clean and I will cleanse you from all your impurities.” Holiness was a matter of things being clean and not

unclean, which is why, for instance a high priest would go into the holy of holies, the mercy seat, which held God's presence in a special way, with a snow-white garment and only an unblemished lamb for the sacrifice. Holiness was cleanness and everything in its proper God-given order and unholiness was uncleanness and things out of whack, not in the proper order which God had intended.

All of the ancient Jewish laws in that sound so strange to us in the Old Testament make more sense when you begin to understand the logic behind what was considered ordered and clean and therefore holy and what in their minds was disordered and dirty. And it certainly wasn't peculiar to their culture either, all cultures have a sense of purity and impurity, cleanness and uncleanness, our own is no exception. In our culture to eat a pig is culturally considered fine, but to eat a dog is disordered and dirty, some might even go so far as to say it's evil or unholy, but that is merely a cultural bias about what is in proper order and what is not. We know in early Jewish law, the opposite was the case, that pigs were considered unclean to eat and it had to do with their cloven hoofs seen as out of the natural order of things and not the way things should be.

What is sacred and what is not runs a very deep course through our cultures and our lives whether we are religious or not and that was what was at stake at the very beginning of Jesus ministry. His messing with people's sense of the sacred was one of the reasons if not the main reason he was such a controversial figure and in the end was executed. To just get a little taste so to speak of the disturbance that Jesus caused among devout and faithful Jews of his time, consider that for Jesus to do the work of healing on the sacred day of sabbath which he was accused of on a number of occasions, would be similar to you first encountering Jesus sitting there eating a plate of dog.

I'm sorry if that's disturbing to you that I keep bringing that up but I think the analogy is apt. It's obvious in the New Testament that not only were many people skeptical they were in the presence of a holy man, many of them thought exactly the opposite... that they might very well be in the presence of a madman. Which is what we would think if we encountered Jesus eating dog. There was so much topsy-turvey of what Jesus was saying and doing to what they assumed was right when it came to their religious traditions.

The Romans could care less. They thought the Jewish sense of what was sacred and their devotion to their odd God was just that, an oddity if not somewhat sacrilegious at times, there's that root word showing up again. The Romans could care less until that point at which Jesus' followers began calling Jesus things like Son of God and Lord of Lord's and then they were like, "wait, that is the title for Caesar", now that is blasphemy and such was not tolerated by Rome but publicly punished, usually crucified, as an example to others not to counter Roman sensibilities of what is sacred and right.

So back to Mark chapter 1. Jesus goes out into the wilderness to start his ministry, a holy man, not going first to the sacred centers of the Jewish and Roman world, but actually in the opposite direction out to the outer reaches, the margins where wild men dwelled, where wild animals threatened, where from a Hebrew perspective, they had been through a period of trial and tribulation before entering the civilized land of milk and honey, where they could finally establish themselves not as wandering nomads in the wilderness but as a proper nation set up with a proper and sacred space for worship known as the temple and synagogues for the study of their sacred literature. That was the proper direction from the wilderness into the sacred places.

Jesus messed that up. He started in the sacred places, remember he was dedicated in the temple and found in the synagogue at the age of 12 but he goes off to start his ministry in the wilderness, that's where the holy voice of God comes to him and affirms him and his ministry, not from the religious leaders in the sacred city, but from the wildman John in the wilderness.

And then Jesus on the most sacred day of the sabbath, as Janet read to us, comes to one of the more sacred places of Jewish culture the synagogue and what of ALL THINGS happens there? He doesn't discover the holy but the unholy, he discovers a sacred space touched by uncleanness, and an unclean spirit asking him "what do you, Holy One of God, have to do with us?!" All this happens before we are even done with the first chapter of Mark. We the readers have been put on notice, just as the people of Jesus' time had, "this arrival is nothing like what you were expecting when you heard about the coming of the Messiah." And those people on the margins who didn't know any better, those who had few if any expectations of Messiah were the ones who could hear him and receive him. And those people in the know, who had expectations formed by their religion mostly did not hear him and mostly did not receive him. In fact they wanted him dead because he challenged what was sacred to them. Isn't that ironic?! The Holy One of God challenged their holy ideas of God and was killed for it. What do you think about that?

So consider with me 3 implications of this for us and our lives and I'll end with these. First of all, we should not get too cozy and settled in our notions of God and the things we hold sacred such that we are no longer open to how the utter mystery of God is revealed in our lives and might speaks to our lives and work through our lives. If we think we know how God speaks or how God is not

speaking to us, we better take a step back and humbly just pay attention or we will miss or even counter how God is wanting to be in our lives. To use a hackneyed phrase, with God we should definitely expect the unexpected.

Secondly, we look to the margins. I mean, please listen to me or Judy preaching at you on Sunday mornings but really really listen to the voices on the margins of your life, the voices of the least of those in your circles, especially, the voices of those you've too often or lately dismissed or pushed aside or that prickle you beyond tolerance. Look at those margins, remember throughout the Gospels it's there that Jesus goes and God acts and then ask yourself – is God speaking to me in this least likely place?!

And thirdly I'll come back to this once we begin Lent with the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, but thirdly don't underestimate the presence and power of evil in the world. I mean, we should be overly obsessed with it either but that there is an intelligence beyond just evil acts that uses and manipulates people towards its end and away from God's end seems pretty likely in this world. Jesus can be quite confrontational throughout the Gospels and while that's often confronting the power holders who are hypocritical and protective of their own positions and power, Jesus also confronts that deeper and broader spiritual reality at works against God to the diminishment of human community and welfare. The swelling and moving and overtaking of individual free will that seems to occur in mob violence is a good example that is in our face these days. But we are not immune from that negative force and we could do worse than to simply be aware of that presence and intentionally work and pray against it in our own lives. How's that for opening a can of worms just before I close my sermon?

So back to our root word in this closing statement: Consider that Jesus comes from the wild places into our lives to consecrate them and make them sacrosanct so that we might be a sanctuary containing his sacred presence so our lives may be a living sacrifice for the sake of love. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen!