

JANUARY 29, 2012: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20 I Corinthians 7:32-35 Mark 1:21-28

Were I to ask, "What was Jesus' first miracle?" the vast majority of people would probably answer, "Turning water into wine at the Cana wedding reception." That's correct - if you're in John's gospel. But it's the wrong answer if you're reading the other three.

Students of Scripture understand that each evangelist uses Jesus' first miracle to set the theme of his gospel. There's a specific theological reason why John makes the water/wine miracle the "first of Jesus' signs." But since we're in Mark, not John, we'll leave the latter's theology for another commentary. Our task today is to find out why Mark's Jesus makes an exorcism his first miracle.

It's important to understand that at the time of Jesus demons were regarded as the source of most of the world's evils. They were not only responsible for moral evil, they were also given credit for lots of the everyday disasters and problems we humans face. If I, for instance, wake up with a cold, I presume at least three demons have invaded my body. (Readers of Luke's gospel should especially remember this when he mentions that Jesus cast seven demons from Mary Magdalene. That's not the evangelist's way of saying she was a morally evil person.) Here Mark gives us a glimpse of what his gospel's about by telling us that Jesus begins the first day of his public ministry by casting a demon from a possessed man during a Capernaum Sabbath synagogue service. When the about-to-be-expelled demon asks, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" the obvious answer is, "Certainly!" That's not only the goal of Jesus' ministry, Mark presumes it's also the life-goal of all who commit themselves to carrying on Jesus' ministry. Like him, we should spend our lives ridding this world of as much evil as possible. Throughout the rest of his gospel, Mark will tell us how to go about achieving this goal. We're expected to do our best to have less evil - moral, physical, psychological - in the world when we die than existed when we were born.

Paul takes for granted that nothing should stand in our way of accomplishing this task, even marriage. "An unmarried man," he presumes, "is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided." We must remember that at this point of his ministry Paul's still expecting Jesus' Second Coming to happen any day. He never seems to have dealt with the question of someone living a full natural life unmarried. Besides, we can't overlook his disclaimer, "I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you." Many reading this commentary would be the first to testify that they're far better able to tackle evil with the help of an intimate partner than if they tried to do it alone. Paul would certainly agree that, married or single, imitating Jesus is essential to our faith.

How do we know what things should be eradicated and how we're to go about it? That's where our Deuteronomy reading comes in. Throughout Scripture, the primary way of surfacing God's will is to surface and listen to the prophets in our midst. One of the Bible's worst curses is, "May you have no prophets." Just before the prophet Moses' death, Yahweh promises there'll always be a prophet for Yahweh's people. They'll not be left to wander in the dark.

Perhaps one of the greatest evils we have to get rid of is the belief that we don't have to listen to the prophets in our midst. Then again, how do we know who's a real prophet and who's a fake?

I feel another column coming on.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

## FEBRUARY 5, 2012: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Scholars frequently point out that the vocabulary in the second half of today's Marcan gospel pericope is found in just one other place: Jesus' agony in the garden. We'll see there's a good reason for this.

Mark continues to give us a glimpse of Jesus' first full day of public ministry. After this carpenter-turned-itinerant preacher exorcised a demoniac in the Capernaum synagogue, he now cures Simon's mother-in-law, then before he turns in "he cured many who were sick with various diseases and he drove out many demons . . ." Quite a full day. He's certainly the talk of the town. We'd logically expect him to pick up the next morning where he left off the night before. But, to his disciples' surprise, he's nowhere to be found. He got up before anyone else and "went off to a deserted place, where he prayed."

Though I presume the historical Jesus prayed often, Mark's Jesus prays only when he's under "Messianic stress:" he prays only when he's uncertain about what he, as Messiah, should do next. Zeroing in on Jesus' humanity, the evangelist tells his readers that Jesus' future course of action wasn't quite as clear as we'd presume it to be. He had to make decisions that morning, just as he'd later have to do in Gethsemane.

Here the choice is clear: does he stay in Capernaum as the local, well-received hero, or does he risk going to "nearby villages" and also preaching there? He eventually decides to do the latter. "So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee." (No doubt, on Good Friday evening, the followers who searched for him early that morning would have paraphrased the late historian Cornelius Ryan, bemoaning the fact their leader went to a village and synagogue too far.)

One of the life-giving aspects which comes from our imitating the risen Jesus is a constant tug to go further than people expect us to go. Our faith always invites us to take that extra step, even when it entails risks.

Paul tells his Corinthian community about a risky step he took in his ministry. "When I preach, I offer the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel." Knowing the historical Jesus permitted missionaries to be supported by those they evangelized, the Apostle goes beyond that permission. Fearing some will accuse him of "being in the business for the money," he refuses to accept any pay from the communities he evangelized. If his tent-making business hit on hard times, he simply didn't eat.

It's at this point that our Job passage comes into play. All of us, at one time or another, identify with the picture the sacred author paints. "Is not our life on earth a drudgery? Are not our days those of hirelings? . . . If in bed I say, 'When shall I arise?' then the night drags on." Life can be a boring, unexciting experience -for those who refuse to step outside the boundaries of other peoples' expectations.

Mark's Jesus doesn't want his followers to fall into that trap. Though his plan often entails risks and giving up the security for which we constantly long, Jesus wants us to experience a fulfilling life. He refuses to let his disciples just sit around all day, patiently waiting for a death which will usher us into everlasting life. He expects us to begin living that life long before we hit the pearly gates.

We know what eventually happened to Jesus because he refused to return to Capernaum that morning. Had he chosen to do so, he probably would have lived a long life, doing good, praised by everyone in town. He'd have died peacefully, friends and family gathered at his bedside, not crucified and deserted on a hill miles away in Jerusalem. But then again, no one would ever have written a gospel about him, and we'd have no one to imitate.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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