

SET ON A KINGDOM PATH
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
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What do you imagine it would have been like to actually encounter Jesus personally? Listen to Mark:

“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’. ” (Mark 1:27).

Amazement at this man, clearly different than anyone else they had ever encountered. One who taught not as the scribes taught, which was “through text and tradition, citing the views of other rabbis.” (Bock, *Mark*, p. 126) This man taught “as one having authority.” (Mark 1:22) It was a singular style, involving direct declarations, and was combined with actions to support the claims.

To encounter Jesus was to encounter the presence of the Kingdom of God itself: a perfect unity of words and actions, with powerful outcomes as a result. The actions are sometimes what we moderns would call performing miracles. In New Testament times, which would not have seen such things as necessarily outside the normal “rules” of nature (Bock, p. 125, n. 38), “acts of power” would have been the term that was used. In today’s Gospel, the “act of power” is an exorcism: a man is possessed by an unclean spirit, who recognizes Jesus as “the Holy One of God.” (Mark 1:24) Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, who comes out of the man. It is a dramatic scene indeed: evil is confronted by the presence of God’s Kingdom, and the Kingdom prevails. Jesus was not the only exorcist active during his lifetime: but he was the only one who combined acts of power like this with declarative, authoritative teaching. To encounter him was to know oneself to be in proximity to God himself, bringing about his purposes right before one’s eyes. This man Jesus mediated God’s own power.

That’s what Mark tells us about what it was like to encounter Jesus personally. There is no worked out Trinitarian theology here. But there is a profound sense that one couldn’t possibly be closer to God on earth than in the presence of this particular man.

Here we are once again looking through Mark’s special window into a very immediate experience of Jesus. Once again, the special power of this Gospel is that Jesus is made intensely real for us. We feel a part of the proceedings. We believe in the experience of Jesus’ audience because we are a part of it ourselves. We see the real man the way they did, and we share in their amazement.

We may even be reminded of experiences we have had with Jesus ourselves. Here’s the thing: it has been my experience as a priest that most of us church folks, when we really stop and sit with it, can describe personal experiences we have had with Jesus. But things get in the way of accessing them. One is that we get tangled up in theology, questions of what we really mean by language like “the Second Person of the Trinity,” “the Son of God,” “Jesus is God.” These are all important matters, not to be dodged. But sometimes we get stuck in difficulties explaining them to ourselves, often lasting for a long time, and we feel removed from our experiences with Jesus. Remember, no-one witnessing the exorcism in today’s Gospel (except the unclean spirit being exorcised), *theologized* about who they thought Jesus was. They described their own experience – amazement – and what they had seen: one who taught with his own authority and performed an act of power.

In the Methodist tradition in which I was raised, Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience were the four pillars of Christian faith as outlined by John Wesley. Wesley was himself an Anglican priest, and while his outline is slightly different than our Anglican quadrilateral, it is well within an Anglican

way of thinking. I'm suggesting that what we encounter in the Gospel of Mark is the Experience piece, meeting Jesus before there was a New Testament, or Church Tradition, or Reason-based theological categories. I think that most of us have met this Jesus, and it's important not to forget it.

Let me share one example from my own life. Some of you have heard me say that I felt called to ministry quite early in my life – certainly by my mid-teens – but I was very resistant to life as an ordained person. I felt socially immature and awkward enough without adding what I saw as the restrictions of being a pastor. I went to Conservatory and tried hard to immerse myself in music and ignore that irksome sense of calling to something else.

I got to the second summer after graduating with my Trombone Performance degree before meeting Jesus in a way I couldn't ignore. That summer I was playing the trombone at the Pierre Monteux Domaine School in Hancock, Maine (ask me – I'll tell you more about it!) and spent my evenings debating theology and the Bible with a more mature member of the orchestra. I was quite impressed with my arguments, each night, and felt like I was out-debating my friend. I began to think that maybe God would leave me alone.

On the very evening I thought to myself, “yes, I think I've shaken the calling thing off,” and went for a triumphant run along the ocean road, Jesus came. I really can't describe it any other way. I was stretching out on the lawn after my run, and suddenly knew that I was not alone – that somehow, I was on sacred ground. My argumentativeness – my arrogance – were silenced (even “cast out,” if you like!) I literally stood up, went into the house, and sent for my application to Divinity School.

Today, and this week, ask yourself: has Jesus intervened in your life in this way? I expect that if you quiet your mind and set aside your theological entanglements you will find that he has. Tell your story to someone else. Share the good news: when we meet Jesus, we know the presence of God, and our lives are set on a Kingdom path.