

Binding the Strong Man... continued

What are you most afraid of? The dark? Death? Illness? Maybe you're afraid of being vulnerable... afraid to trust, to take risks. I'm afraid of how polarized and vitriolic our society has become with those who **make** the rules getting more and more removed from those who suffer from the rules. Today's lectionary passages bring us face-to-face with some of our deepest fears and vulnerability – and then remind us that our hope, our courage, our healing, our life comes from God. Perhaps the lectionary editors are buoying us up as we head into the season of Lent, the time we think about those vulnerable, dark 40 days for Jesus and the ways he faithfully ministered through them.

Words about **our** fears and **God's** faithfulness have been both spoken and sung this morning. Already in our Call to Worship we were reminded to retreat into God's love, to hide in God's deliverance, to trust in God as our refuge and strength.

Psalm 30 is a powerful poem of praise – that comes AFTER what might have been a near-death experience. The psalmist tells about God raising him up after he cried out to God for help, restoring his life from the Pit of Sheol. The Psalmist even gives us a shining example of bargaining with God, pointing out that it was really in God's best interest to save him! After all, what good could have come from his death – he couldn't praise God if he was dead! And he lived! And he's definitely praising God now! Dancing and joyful – God is the Psalmist's refuge and strength.

The tune that the women sang didn't include a direct mention of God, but the message was there, just in a little different package. The song-writer's need was for the mending of a broken heart. The writer's longing was to retreat to the basics, the things that grounded her, that reminded her of who she is and of what's important. To be able to see with closed eyes, to forgive and to apologize.

As Miles mentioned, this morning's Gospel lesson follows directly from last week's. As Mark tells the story, Jesus was just beginning his Galilean ministry in the small sea-side town of Capernaum, He had begun his healings and as we have learned, the unclean spirits, the demons, were the first to recognize Jesus – who he was and what he was doing and by whose authority. We learned about Ched Myers' book, a commentary on Mark, called *Binding the Strong Man*, in which Myers names the book by the story Jesus told in Mark, chapter 3. There, we read about some scribes that were irritated and threatened by Jesus' ministry – so much so that they accused him of being possessed by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. And when Jesus caught wind of this accusation, he said, "How can Satan cast out Satan?... No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered." The strong man was Satan and Jesus was the self-described one who came to tie Satan up and plunder his house. As Tom explained last week, "the subtitle of Myers' book is *A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. And by using the term 'political' he is not referring to our current system of elected leaders and ways of governing our countries; rather, he's talking

about much broader, but no less current, systems of oppression and violence, social, economic and political domination that pervade our world.”

Here’s some of what Myers has to say about this story of Jesus cleansing the leper. Here, “Jesus launches his nonviolent assault upon the symbolic order of Jewish Palestine... even as he challenges the social power and exclusivity of the ruling groups, Jesus is simultaneously introducing an alternative social practice based on inclusivity.” You see, there were social and religious regulations about leprosy. First of all, leprosy was a communicable disease, therefore, a priest (who had gone to great lengths to be ritually clean) had to officiate at the cleansing of the leper. Jesus flew in the face of both of those laws. First, he presumed the priestly role with no ritual cleansing, and then he touched the leper, which meant that Jesus’ health and wellness became communicable, not the disease. The power of both the disease and the priestly role was shattered. Another commentary put it this way. “Operating in direct contradiction of the Levitical code, Jesus touches the leper before healing him. Instead of becoming contaminated, Jesus infects the leper with wholeness. He not only overturns a physical illness; he decimates a social and cultic norm and thereby sets the pattern for a discipleship ministry that will engage in the same kinds of revolutionary, boundary-breaking activity. Caring for broken people must always be of higher priority than fear of breaking the law.” (The Discipleship Study Bible, page 1753)

There are a couple of other interesting and important revolutionary clues in this story that we have to be careful not to lose in the translation. In English, we read that the leper said to Jesus, “If you *choose*, you can make me clean.” And, “Moved with *pity*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean.” Here is Ched Myers’ take on these verses:

“The leper appears aware that his approach to Jesus, a nonpriest, was itself in violation of the...system, which is why he gives Jesus a chance to refuse. It is almost as if he says, ‘You could declare me clean if only you would *dare*.’ Jesus does indeed dare, but Mark tells us he is angry. (Because) after the declaration of wholeness has been delivered,” Myers understands the Greek word used to be more accurately interpreted, “Jesus, snorting with indignation”, dispatches the man back to the priests. These strong emotions would only make sense if the man had already been to the priests who, for some reason had rejected his petition. Deciding to take issue... Jesus sternly gives the leper these orders: See that you say nothing to anyone! Rather, go back and show yourself to the priest and make the offering prescribed by Moses for your cleansing as a witness against them. The cleansed leper’s task is not to publicize the miracle but to help confront an ideological system. Myers argues that “the change in object (from ‘priest’ to ‘them’) suggests a protest against the entire purity apparatus, which the priests control... Jesus’ anger, then, is directed against the symbolic order of purity of which this man is a victim.

As we all do, the cleansed leper made his own choice. Maybe he really wasn’t interested in confronting the system. Maybe he didn’t even realize that’s what Jesus was challenging him to do. Maybe he was just plain old scared of the priests and didn’t want to go back and face them again. Or maybe he was just so happy to be restored that he couldn’t help himself – “he went out and began to proclaim it feely and to spread the word.” Which was really, not such a bad choice.

So, whatever you're most afraid of – the dark, death, illness, vulnerability, the unjust systems in our world – know that Jesus is binding the strong man and is inviting us into his upside down, nonviolent revolution. Know that God's faithfulness is stronger than any of our fears. Know that our hope, our courage, our healing, our life comes from God. How can we be silent about that!?