

Fake News!

June 10, 2018 Mark 3:20-35

Roger Barkley Congregational Church of Northridge

Mark's gospel opens this way:

Mark 1:1 *The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,*

This familiar line as a bold, radical affront to the Romans who occupied Israel.

Why?

But Caesar Augustus had already declared himself to be God, and so Caesar Tiberius (who ruled during Jesus' life) called himself the son of God.

Roman coins were disseminated across their vast empire with this message.

In addition, the official reports of Caesar's achievements were called "gospel", and the international rule of Rome was called peace.

So, from the very first words of the earliest narrative gospel, the church declared that Rome's claims were fake news.

The early Christian movement declared that Jesus is the Son of God, not Caesar; that the Gospel is about Jesus, not Caesar; that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, not Rome.

Today's scripture opens with an exhausted Jesus trying to get an evening away from the relentless crowds clamoring for healing and from the religious leaders constantly nitpicking at his teaching.

From the beginning, Jesus has framed his ministry as his struggle against evil.

In Mark's gospel, the first thing he does after his baptism is wrestle with Satan in the desert, and then right after calling his disciples he starts casting out demons – all this in the first twenty-five verses of chapter 1.

And this continues with today's passage as the Pharisees and scribes accuse Jesus of healing through the powers of Beelzebul, an evil god known as the "lord of the house."

Jesus turns their accusation around, implying that he's come to bind the evil strongman who has been claiming the world as *his* house.

Mark 3:27 *In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house.*

Jesus has come to bind Satan and clean house.

In fact, this passage is often considered Jesus' mission statement in the Gospel of Mark.

Many modern Christians are uncomfortable with the concept of evil, especially as we now understand that many of the diseases Jesus healed by what he understood as exorcising demons, were in fact caused by infections, neurological disorders, or mental illness.

But in trying to get biblical metaphors to match 21st-century science, we've lost appreciation for the angels, demons and mysteries of the spiritual world.

In 1880's England, Sherlock Holmes launched his career as a consulting detective.

Holmes became locked in a life-long battle of wits with his arch-nemesis Professor James Moriarty, whom he describes as "the most diabolical criminal mind the world has ever seen."

Holmes comes to understand that Moriarty controls a vast but invisible underground criminal empire.

To local police, a particular crime may look like the brutality of a street thug or a theft carried-out by a neighborhood gang, but Holmes instinctively knows when Moriarty and his minions are behind it.

Especially in the Gospel of Mark, that is how Jesus viewed the condition of the world.

Throughout the gospel, we hear demons shriek and threaten as Jesus approaches people suffering with a range of diseases.

Imagine trying to live in today's world without the ability to read.

How could we confidently navigate our way through road signs or read restaurant menus?

The spiritually illiterate are in a similar quandary.

Trying to navigate a world where competing spiritual forces are at work, they only see the tip of the iceberg ... incidents of injustice, a corporation poisoning our world, an outburst of genocide in a distant land, politicians stoking racism to consolidate power.

To the spiritually illiterate, these are random, isolated incidents, but to Jesus much of the world's suffering actually is the expression of evil, whose tentacles reach into every corner of the life.

Today's passage abruptly announces the arrival of Jesus' family.

As a side note, there once was a woman in our congregation whose husband was a devout Catholic – and, of course, Catholic doctrine teaches that Jesus' mother Mary was a virgin throughout her life.

This passage sent him into a crisis of faith ... how could Jesus have brothers if mom was a virgin?

When he heard that the Book of James was written by one of the brothers - possibly one who confronted him during the incident –he became deeply disturbed and said that he'd never again trust anything the church taught.

Anyway, one would expect that the folks from back home would be feeling some pride for what Jesus is doing.

Here's a homeboy who's really made something of himself, but it appears that they've been swayed by the accusations directed his way.

Mark 3:21 *When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."*

"Take charge" is too mild a term.

They came to grab him, seize him ... it's the same verb used later to describe how the soldiers grabbed Jesus when they arrested him.

Scripture is silent about their motives, but just as they arrive and we get a hint that trouble is brewing, Mark shifts to the entrance of the authorities from Jerusalem.

This is a narrative style used by Mark to keep his gospel tight, gripping and fast moving.

Mark packs a story within a story: just as we begin to hear about the family controversy, he shifts to the accusations of the scribes and we're left wondering what the family will do.

While local authorities felt threatened by the popular new rabbi, their challenges of him had repeatedly backfired, so they decided to call in the big guns from Jerusalem.

They get front row seats to witness the work of God in action through his healings, exorcisms and teaching – but their lenses are so distorted that they come to an unexpected conclusion:

Mark 3:22 And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons".

With their accusation, the Jerusalem scribes are calling good evil and evil good.

They are distorting the Spirit of God into the spirit of darkness.

More fake news.

Remember, these men were representing the Temple.

The Temple was created to worship God ... at one time the Jews thought that God actually resided in the Temple.

But now the Temple had become so obsessed with preserving its rules, power and prestige that the only answer they can muster to Jesus' miracles was to call him an agent of Satan.

Jesus' first response is to invite a logical debate.

Why would Satan use his own power to undo his own evil works?

Jesus effectively tells the religious authorities that they are spiritually dyslexic and then throws down the gauntlet:

Mark 3:28-29 Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.

This passage has troubled people for centuries.

How could Jesus say that anything is unforgivable?

Does it mean that if you've ever said "F" the Holy Spirit that Saint Peter will turn you away at Heaven's gate?

Well, first remember that righteousness means having a right relationship with God, and forgiveness is about reestablishing that relationship.

But how can anyone reestablish relationship with God as long as they stubbornly deny what God is doing?

Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

If I bolt the door and refuse to let God in, then I'm effectively on my own ... not because God desires that, but because I'm keeping Him out.

How can I receive forgiveness if I turn my back on the source of forgiveness?

Have you ever been around someone who incessantly rehashes the same old story of hurt or betrayal?

Maybe about a wife who cheated on her husband, or husband who was abusive?

And I don't mean the healthy processing of emotions as they work toward healing.

I knew someone who told the same story about her lousy marriage for years.

She'd get wound up and I could almost anticipate the exact phrases she would use.

She wouldn't let it go, she would not forgive.

The result was that she was permanently stuck.

She was owned by her pain that remained as fresh as the days when her former husband screamed at her.

Her pain and resentment became her world, and as long as she insisted in living in that tormented world she kept her healing locked out.

Maybe you know someone like that.

Mark's narrative then jumps back to his family, who was caught-up in the same distortion as the scribes and pharisees.

He is out of his mind had become their perception of Jesus' ministry.

In the Jewish culture of his time, bloodline was everything.

It is hard for us to grasp, but in that culture, family gave you your identity, your security, your support.

You were your family.

But as he redefines the meaning of family, Jesus does not even invite his kinfolk in – an unthinkable snub.

Will Willimon served as a Methodist bishop down south for some years.

He remembers visiting a new church that was full of energy and enthusiasm.

Right before he was to preach, the pastor leaned over and said, "Wait a minute. Right before you preach we're going to see a video."

"A video? What's it about?"

"Oh, it's one of our 'why I like Inner-change Church' testimonies.

So, the video opens with a young woman looking directly at the camera.

She says that one night her boyfriend beat her really bad.

It wasn't the first time, and she'd learned how to wear make-up to cover the bruises.

This time was bad, so she didn't leave the house for several days, but eventually she needed milk for the baby, so she applied her make-up extra thick, put on her sunglasses and went on her way.

While she was pushing her shopping cart down one of the aisles a woman she did not know came up to her and said, "Who did that to you, hon? Did a man do that to you?"

She said, "Oh, it's nothing. I just had an accident."

She said, "Honey you don't need to lie to me."

And the stranger reached over, pulled off her sunglasses and said, "Girl, that's no accident. I used to have those kinds of bruises, too, so I know."

Then she said, "You gotta go to church. Where do you live? I'm going to pick you up tomorrow morning and take you to my church."

Then the woman on the video continued, "That's how me and my baby got to Inner-change.

"When I got here at that first Sunday I just looked around at all the people, and they were treating me special. And then I said to myself, 'This is the family that God meant for me to have.'"

Many years ago when was I first looking around for a church for myself, I kept hearing the phrase, "We're just like family."

Now, I love my family – don't get me wrong.

But my experience of family to that point was a little crazy.

There was anger, there were lies, there was depression, so I wasn't so sure that a church *family* was what I was looking for.

But Jesus redefined what it means to be family.

Mark 3:34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

You may arrive here Sunday morning feeling pretty beat up by your life:

Over-work. Pressure at work. Tensions at home. Financial worries. Grief.

Or maybe you're aching inside from shame: Your health, your weight, your addiction, your falling short of who you think you should be.

Well, you've come to the right place because Jesus is here, and through Christ you get a fresh start with a family that is healthy and that cares about you – no matter who you are, or where you've been on your life's journey.