**Good News Wins**

**Mark 3:20-35**

**June 6, 2021**

Once upon a time two men were riding a bicycle built for two when they came to a steep hill. It took a great deal of struggle for them to complete what proved to be a very challenging climb. When they got to the top, the man in front turned to the other and said, “Boy, that sure was a hard climb!” The fellow in back replied, “Yes, and we would have certainly rolled down backwards if I hadn’t kept the brakes on all the way!” If we’ve lived very long we all have encountered unseen and unexpected forces at work that have inhibited our forward movement. We pay off the car, then the water pump or the transmission fails. We plan a project in our department, then a significant person on the team is transferred or resigns. We plan for vital congregational ministry, then the unexpected happens, someone leaves, and our plans have to change. And in the midst of it all, we are trying to be faithful people, do the will of God, love our neighbor, be good citizens, and we’re not always sure we’re doing any of them very well.

Our story this morning from the gospel of Mark invites us to see how the gospel happens in the midst of unforeseen challenges and the messiness of life. As Mark tells it, this was early in Jesus’ ministry. He had been out and about teaching and healing, then he named his disciples and went home for a while. His blossoming popularity followed him and so did the crowds such that there was no place for everyone to get a meal. Some of the religious leaders just happened to dropped by also to intimidate and discredit this upstart Jesus who was not following the social a d religious norms. It seems that Jesus’ family was also upset and trying to protect him and maybe themselves and they sought to pull him out of the fray. And Jesus, in his usual turn things upside down way, began to speak in parables which are as mysterious as they are misunderstood. Understanding parables can help us make sense of the bible. One of the better definitions was created by the late NT theologian C. H Dodd. He said “At its simplest aparable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” This text from Mark surely gets our attention, leaves our minds in doubt about it’s precise application, and surely activates our thinking. Jesus’ talk of Satan, binding a strong man, blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and questioning who are his real family makes one want to avoid this story altogether. And yet, parables also draw us in and remind us that when it comes to the reign of God, when it comes to the way of Jesus, our conventional thinking longs to be freed even if it is turned upside down…being satisfied with the status quo and what benefits us tugs at our conscience and we hope it will be called into question… and as the Quakers say, the reign of God is such that way opens in listening to our scripture and tradition, listening to one another, to the best thinking of the day, and in listening for God in the midst of it all.

 I don’t have to say that we all are aware of different conclusions about what is evil in the world. Jesus was being accused of doing the work of the devil by healing and feeding people, not to mention speaking of the kingdom of God that calls for just treatment of the neighbor and stranger. Some of the religious leaders of the day were very happy with the way things were. Someone has said, “satanic power never shows an interest in loosening the screws that hold oppression and indignity firmly in place.” And Jesus responds to their accusation by stating the obvious…how can someone be supporting evil when they are speaking out and acting against evil? He says, the strong man, the evil power or powers have to be overcome before one can do anything about it. And there is the gospel... Jesus is the one who is stronger, who has tied up, overcome the powers of evil, death, and oppression and has ushered in the reign of God. That’s what scares those in power and at the same time that’s what gives the powerless the greatest hope. Justice, mercy, compassion, welcoming the stranger is what we long for and what we struggle to integrate into our living. Jesus’s way of doing this was fascinating and freeing to the crowds and grounds for execution to those who had a stake in controlling the way things were. None of us can tell what Jesus is going to do, yet his action is always gracious, just, and compassionate…for everyone. That’s where this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit comes in. Those in power wanted to limit God to their narrow conclusions and rules. They missed God’s Spirit at work in Jesus and misnamed it as evil. When we misname God’s Spirit at work, we miss the mark. It does not mean it’s over for us… grace is the overarching theme of our faith story. One of my “go to” theologians when I’m reflecting on scripture is Suzanne Guthrie. She is an Episcopal priest and has served as pastor, chaplain at Vassar and Cornell and she is a writer. She offers a helpful way to see this and says, “I've observed that no matter how often or how deeply I've messed up, the Holy Spirit has always made a nice shepherd's pie out of my left-overs. Every wrong turn yielded up a creative path toward something good in spite of myself. When I forget the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, or doubt that the Spirit can get me out of my latest scrape, I'm sinning willfully. The Spirit says, There she goes again... Oooo. Ouch! Just watch that girl spin out of control! Okay. Let's see what kind of ART I can make with her mistake this time. Humm, we'll take a little of this part of her life... and that...throw in a tad of new stuff...voila!” Hopefully some of the crowd that day had ears to hear the message in Jesus’ parabolic comments. At least those in the crowd who had been moved by his words and actions were open to the presence of God that seemed to be coming through. It was some of the religious leaders that were sceptical and judgemental, basically refusing to believe God was at work.

So the good news is that Jesus is always found in the midst of the mess, the suffering, the injustice, and he sticks with his original mission based on Isaiah’s words to “proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the prisoners go free.” Those kinds of words and actions never go far without a fight. This even reaches into families. Jesus said that his family were those who “do the will of God.” Now, our humanity and failure to do Gokilod’s will notwithstanding, we want to be faithful and when we try, all our relationships are affected. Someone has said, “when (we) commit (ourselves) to offering the same kind of unimaginably gracious hospitality and (unexpectedly) wide welcome that Jesus exhibits, (we’re) bound to encounter some flack. (No one) will likely call us demon-possessed, as the Scribes in today’s reading do, but don’t be surprised if people close to (us) – including even our own family” think we’re off our rockers.” In our text, even Jesus’ own family judge him for not acting and believing like he is supposed to. Oh my. Good news like this shakes things up…and good news like this brings transformation, new life, justice, and believe it or not…peace. That’s where our trust comes in…believing that God is here…in our midst…even when a church is in transition…even when we are tired and afraid after a year of pandemic isolation and recorded worship watched from our living rooms in our pajamas. Jesus is the one who has overcome the strong man, despair, injustice and fear. Jesus is the one who cares about the outcast and stranger, Jesus loves the wounded and the sinner, Jesus shows up when the powerful are oppressing the powerless and says no to injustice and yes to grace and love. Jesus is relentless and radical in his welcome and forgiveness.... and his way, the reign of God is the one that has won and wins. Thanks be to God.