1/29/12

SHAKING THINGS UP ON SUNDAY MORNING
(Mark 1:21-28)

What brings you here this morning?

Is that an odd question? I'm really serious, though. So if it seems like an odd question, think about it. Really and truly, what is it that brings you here this morning? Why are you here? What do you expect to get out of it?

Maybe you're here every Sunday and it's just second nature. You don't have to think about it. You get up on Sunday morning and getting ready for church is part of the routine, a kind of ritual. It's what you do. It's as simple as that.

But it's still a choice. No matter how deeply engrained it may be, coming to church is still a choice. You could have done something else. You could have slept in. You could have had a second cup of coffee and done more than glance at the headlines in the newspaper. You could have turned on an old movie or one of the Sunday morning talk shows. You could have gone for a walk. You could have gone out to brunch.

You could have done 1001 other things. And the majority of our friends and neighbors did just that this morning. They found something else to do and they find something else to do Sunday after Sunday. They found something more important or compelling. But not you. You're in the minority because you came to church.

A few years ago Gallup did a poll that asked people who attend church or synagogue at least once a month a basic question: What is the most important reason why you attend? It was open-ended. People didn't have to choose but could say whatever they wanted. The most frequent reason given was "for spiritual growth and guidance." Twenty-three percent said that. Next was "it keeps me grounded or inspired." "It's my faith" and "to worship God" were tied for third place, and "fellowship and community" came in fifth.

I think it's interesting that "to worship God" didn't come in first.

I also think it's interesting, but not surprising, that no one said they go to church to have their prejudices challenged or to have their comfortable worlds turned upside down or to have their beloved idols smashed.

As an aside and just out of curiosity, I wonder if Gallup might have gotten some responses more along those lines if they had put the question to a group of Pentecostals. They expect Sunday morning to be more of an adventure than we do. They expect something to happen. They don't expect the same old routine week in and week out.

We expect our church experience to be controlled, to be on the tame side. This one hour on Sunday morning may be our only chance to get away from it all, to leave our troubles behind or at least get a different perspective on them. This one hour on Sunday morning may be the spiritual anchor we count on to help us ride out life's storms.

I have to assume Jews in Jesus time went to the synagogue for pretty much the same reasons we go to church today. Maybe the donkey ran away on Monday. On Tuesday the youngest daughter got sick. On Wednesday the husband lost his job. On Thursday the tax collector came. On Friday the oldest son got in a fight at school. So when the Sabbath came and it was time to go to the synagogue, all anyone wanted was a little quiet, a little consolation, a little reassurance.

Sorry. That wasn't to be in Capernaum, at least not on that Sabbath. The service begins and right away a poor, disturbed man shatters the calm. "I know who you are, Jesus! Leave us alone!" "Shut up!" shouts Jesus. Jesus speaks and things are back under control, but the congregation is rattled. That was definitely not what they expected or wanted. That was not what they came for.

We don't mind shaking things up in worship once in a while. But we always want to do it carefully, gently. We don't want things to get out of control. Next Sunday we're going to change the order of service to put communion at the beginning so the kids can be here. That's not going to shock anyone. At least I hope it won't. Carolyn Wilkins comes a couple of times a year and gets the place hopping. It's animated by Congregational standards but never out of control. A cardinal rule for Congregational services might be: No apoplexy for worshippers.

I've quoted what Annie Dillard has to say about worship before, but it's worth quoting her again. She asks:

> Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.
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> (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 40-41)

Put "Crash helmets and life preservers available" on the church website and see how many people come. Maybe a few curiosity seekers.

Worship is the center of the church. Nothing we do is more important. Everything we do as a church flows from what we do in worship and why we do what we do. Worship has one purpose and only one purpose, and that purpose is to be with God. We read scripture, we sing hymns, we pray, we listen to eloquent sermons, not for the pleasure they give us but as ways of opening ourselves to God, as ways of being with God.

Martin Luther said that "When the word of God is rightly preached, demons are set loose." Put "Demons may be encountered" on the church website and see how many people come. Not even curiosity seekers.

But haven't there been Sundays when a little demon is set loose, when a little voice whispers, "Wait a minute. This isn't why I'm here. This isn't what I came to hear. I'm not going to sit here and listen to this."

Let me tell you a secret. Sometimes when I'm writing a sermon a little demon whispers to me, "Wait a minute. I don't really want to say that. That's just going to tick someone off."

The whole point of worship, and that includes preaching, is to narrow the gap between us and God, to bring us into God's presence, to remind us that God is not simply an extension of our wants and ideas. The whole point of worship is to let God get to work on us. Worship, in other words, is risky business because it's where we meet the God we didn't expect. It's ironic, isn't it? We can't control God, so we try to control the conditions under which God meets us.

But God refuses to be controlled. And that's a good thing. Left on our own, we would settle for comfortable, we would be happy with routine, we would be content with familiarity. God, on the other hand, promises to do a new thing, something unexpected. Worship infused with the power of the Holy Spirit, worship that brings us into the presence of God is how that happens. So may our worship today and every week prepare us to be transformed and astonished by what God may do among us.