

LOCUSTS AND WILD HONEY

MARK 1: 1-18

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University Church of Chicago

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

E. F. Schumacher liked to tell a story that he felt explained the relationship between economics and technology. One day, he said, a philosopher was out walking in the woods when he came face to face with a figure in a radiant beam of light: none other than the One True and Holy God. The philosopher had spent a lifetime pondering God's existence, so he was only temporarily awed.

"You are the One True God, I presume."

"Yes," said God. "I am."

"Well, then, I wonder if you would be good enough to answer a few simple questions that have been troubling me for some time."

"Certainly. What do you want to know?"

"Is it true, Almighty, that what is for us a million years is for you nothing but the merest moment?"

"Yes, my child, it is true."

"And is it also true," the philosopher went on, "that a million dollars here on earth is for you nothing but a paltry penny?"

"Also quite true."

The philosopher paused only a moment. "Then, I wonder if it would be possible for you, if it is not too much trouble, to give me a penny."

"Why, certainly, my son," said God. "I will be back in just a moment."

We live in a time of immense change, change that comes so swiftly and powerfully that nobody can keep up with it or understand all its implications. The mistake we often make—and it's a mistake we've been making in Western thought for several hundred years—is to mistake change with catastrophe, to think that because we are living through a revolution, the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

We want God to give us simple answers to difficult questions. So, whenever we find a contemporary guru or preacher or philosopher who will tell us what we want to hear, we immediately seize on that person's words as ultimate truth. If you have ever encountered John the Baptist, you know not only how complicated the world is, but also how that crusty old prophet won't permit easy answers.

Unlike the gospel according to Matthew which begins with the birth story of Jesus, and the gospel according to Luke which begin with a birth story of John the Baptist, Mark's Gospel begins with a hearkening back to the words of the prophets. "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight.'"

We must always keep in mind that the gospels are not biographies. While there is some resemblance to the ancient biographical form, a gospel is always, as the name declares, a teller of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Mark's Gospel was written to be read aloud in the worship service of early Christian communities and was intended to be heard as one continuous reading.

The Markan literary motif is based on what biblical scholars call the "messianic secret." Jesus is presented by Mark as a manifestation of the power of God, but this is not recognized by the characters in the story until Jesus dies on the cross and the women experience his resurrection. Over and over again in Mark's telling of the story, even those closest to Jesus just don't get it.

We have heard the story so often that even from our post-Easter perspective the secret is hidden from us. So when John the Baptizer comes roaring out of the wilderness of Judea, he calls the people to wake up.

Mark moves quickly from prophecy to fulfillment in the presentation of John the Baptizer s the one crying in the wilderness. John is described as a preacher and a baptizer, calling those who listen to confess their sins and be baptized. While the preaching of John the Baptist is present in all three Synoptic Gospels, it is important to recognize that in Mark the preaching of John includes no threats. His major role in Mark's Gospel is to be a herald of Jesus.

By hearkening back to the prophets, Mark introduces that complex theological and polemical mixture of judgment and grace. We namby-pamby, self-actualizing twenty-first century Christians love to emphasize grace. We easily turn the Gospel into therapy. During Advent we want to feel all gooey and warm and fuzzy. The culture demands it. But without judgment, grace becomes nothing more than a panacea.

"Fighting Bob" Shuler (not to be confused with Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral) was a Methodist preacher in Los Angeles who began broadcasting over his own radio station KGEF (Keep God Ever First) in 1926. The Reverend Shuler was a feisty servant of God's Word who began broadcasting from his office, but like all preachers, he had to raise a lot of money. So one night he came upon a really effective method.

"I know a man listening in," Shuler told his listeners. "If he does not give me a hundred dollars, I will go on the air next Tuesday night and tell what I know about him."

A lot of money was raised for the church before Tuesday night. Indeed, it was one of the biggest fund-raising nights in the history of the broadcast.

We know what judgment is. We experience it every day and from many different people. We live too much and too often under the burden of the expectations of others, their demands and judgments. Who among us would not send in a hundred dollars to keep our secrets from being revealed.

Stanley Marcus was the marketing genius of Nieman-Marcus. He was a retailing power who transformed American department stores, building on the success of Chicago's own Marshall Field. Mr. Marcus said that his secret was that "those who demand quality are likely to get it."

A church that demands high levels of discipleship is likely to get it. A family that demands high commitment to values is likely to get it. A God who demands obedience is likely to get it. It's apparent to many of us that one weakness of mainline Protestant churches has been at exactly this point. Our laissez-faire attitude about church membership allows anybody in with hardly any requirements has kept us in a condition of blessing the status quo of people's lives. Our easygoing attitudes about baptism without covenant, sacrament without sacrifice, giving a few bucks here so that we feel good while ignoring God's commandments about tithing have left us in Christendom without Christianity. "It is not possible," said my best friend, Soren Kierkegaard, "to be a Christian in Christendom." That is, as long as the church blesses the status quo, is content to go along in order to get along and turns inward to celebrate its own life, one cannot be a follower of Jesus Christ within the confines of the church.

That is exactly what John the Baptizer proclaims as he comes out of the wilderness to preach and baptize and to center the people once again on the message of the prophets. Our culture loves everything new and, like the people to whom John preached in the first century, easily forgets our debt to history. We are in a time of "turnaround" these days, and our temptation is to name Barack Obama as our "savior," a role he certainly would deny. The Gospel of Mark starts the Jesus story by looking back to Isaiah who said, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way: the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

Robert Bolt's magnificent play about Sir Thomas More, *A Man For All Seasons*, has been revived on Broadway. It is one of the most penetrating and inspiring dramas of our time. More was the Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII, which made him the second most powerful man in England in the sixteenth century. Well, given the sexual proclivities of the monarch who spent a good deal of his time and energy hunting both games and women, More was probably the most powerful man in England. He was also a man of great faith, grounded in the church's life and theology.

Thus, when he opposed Henry's scheme to divorce Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Ann Boleyn, the king imprisoned him in the notorious Tower of London. However, the king's plot against Sir Thomas More failed because he could not get anyone to testify the way he, the king, wanted them to. Until Sir Richard Rich lied, and More went to the executioner's axe. And for his lies, Richard Rich is given the governorship of Wales.

In the play, More turns to Rich in his intelligent, ironic way, looks at him with both scorn and pity and says, "The Scriptures say that a man will forfeit his life for fame and money....but for Wales?"

In a time like this, a time of terrible economic, religious and political uncertainty, who among us is not tempted to forfeit her or his life for something far less than Wales? Advent is a dramatic time. It anticipates Christmas, which can be seen as a mammoth struggle between God's light and human darkness. We must recognize that today some, at least, of our worst fears are going to be realized. Our country is on the brink of a major economic collapse, the worst since 1929, and on the brink of an energy crisis of enormous magnitude. And things are going to get much, much worse in Afghanistan and Iraq. George W. Bush's surge was only a temporary stop-gap measure that pushed Sunnis back into power over Shiites in Iraq. And Iraq really belongs to Iran these days.

John the Baptist is not a likeable character. It is not only that he is strange, wearing a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts (yuk!) and wild honey. It is that he demands that we come to Christ with humility.

To claim to speak only absolute truth is to be self-deceived, guilty of both arrogance and foolishness. If we have any knowledge of our own heart, we must know that even when our love is at its best, at its deepest, purest, fiercest, it expresses not only a genuine care for those we cherish but also our self-regarding interests, needs and appetites. We love others not for their sake only, but also for our own. Yeats wrote to Ann Gregory:

I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not for your yellow hair.

My Dad used to tell the story of a man who was climbing in the Arkansas Ozark Mountains when he fell down a high cliff. After falling about a hundred feet, the man was able to hang on to a tree limb. As his grip began to weaken, he saw the shadow of another man who was walking on the cliff from which he had fallen. "Help me," the beleaguered man cried to the man on the path.

The man above looked down and said, "Don't worry. Just let go of the limb. God will take care of you. I am a minister of the gospel and God has revealed this to me."

The hanging man looked down and saw that if he let go of the tree limb, he would fall another several hundred feet into the valley below. He looked up at the preacher. Then, he shouted plaintively, "Is there anybody else up there?"

The Baptizer comes out of the wilderness to remind us of God's eternal truths, to remind us that our forebears trusted and that God never deserted them. There is no other than God on whom we can rely.

