

4-Feb-2018 Sermon

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“God Himself propounds the problem of God—and answers it.” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 69.

In 1965 Bob Dylan wrote a song, for his *Highway 61 Revisited* album, called “Ballad of a Thin Man,” about a man named Jones, who keeps blundering into strange situations, and the more questions he asks, the less the world makes sense to him. And the refrain, which Dylan repeats seven times, is “Something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you, Mr. Jones?” It's meant to be a protest song: the bourgeois establishment of the press didn't get Dylan; they didn't get young people; they just didn't get it.

“Something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you, Mr. Jones?” That's also a good summary of the book of Mark. Throughout the book, people do not *get* Jesus. The regular folks, in general, don't. The Pharisees don't. And even the disciples don't. It's a sixteen-chapter testimony to the cluelessness of humankind. In the other gospels, the disciples at least pretty much get it, but not in Mark.

You might think that Peter is the exception, but he isn't. In chapter 8, he affirms to Jesus that Jesus *is* the Messiah, which is good, but three verses later he rebukes Jesus for foretelling His death on the cross, and so Jesus has to reprimand him, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter doesn't get it. In chapter 9, Peter is on the Mount of Transfiguration, which is like a master's class in terms of the knowledge of God: the clothes of Jesus are dazzling white; Moses is there; Elijah is there; God the Father is speaking, and then Peter raises his hand and says, “Hey, Home Depot is still open! Why don't I just go over there and pick up some quarter-inch plywood and 2x4s and

make you guys some booths. Cuz it's—you know--the festival of booths." Peter knows something is happening, but he doesn't what it is. In the next chapter, on the way to Jerusalem, Peter says to Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you!" Great! It means he knows that Jesus is the boss; Jesus is the one worth sacrificing for. The trouble is, *in* Jerusalem, a short time later, Peter betrays Jesus. Three times. And the last we see of Peter in the book of Mark is the image of him weeping, wondering, "What kind of person *am* I? How could I *do* that?"

Even the book itself is a testimony to the flaws of humankind: at some point soon after the book of Mark was written, the last page got separated and lost. Even though people tried to supply some substitute endings for the book, we don't actually know how it ends. The last verse of the book as we have it now reads, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." The gospel as it ends now, ends in the fear and confusion of the women, and the weeping of Peter.

Apparently it's easy not to get Jesus. And when we don't get something—like Mr. Jones—we tend to ask questions, namely, "Who is that man?" It's the same question in the Dylan song and in the gospel of Mark. The trouble is, our questions are usually an attempt to see how things fit into our world. How things fit into *our* world. And that reminds me of another song, 20 years later, by Madonna, namely, "Material Girl," with the refrain, "We are living in a material world, and I am a material girl." On one hand, of course, Madonna is right—we do live in a material world! But the world of the Bible is from A to Z *both* a material world and a *spiritual* world.

So let's look at some of the questions people have, in the book of Mark. "Why does this fellow talk like that? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ask the teachers of the law when a man is lowered through the roof into a crowded room so Jesus can heal him. "Why does Jesus eat with

sinners and tax collectors?” the Pharisees ask on another occasion. “Why don’t your disciples fast, like disciples are supposed to do?” “Why are you doing on the Sabbath what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” And the disciples ask questions as well. “What does *that* parable mean?” they ask about the parable of the sower. “Teacher, don’t you care that we drown?” they ask in the boat in the storm. And at points their questions betray their lust for power: “Hey Jesus, which one of us gets to sit at your right hand when you come into your glory? Hmm?”

The Pharisees and the disciples don’t get it because their questions are all variations of the question, “Jesus, how do you fit into *our* world? The material world. Can you *just help me understand that?*” Because they *knew* something was happening, but they *didn’t know what it was*.

And we’re the same way, aren’t we? I know I am. I’m happy with Jesus, as long as He fits into my material world.

So Jesus is a problem. God is a problem. The people in Mark don’t “get” Jesus. Like them, we are likely to ask the wrong questions; like Mr. Jones, we know something is going on, but we don’t know what it is. But God helps us. God *reveals* Himself. In the Bible, it is God who sets out the problem of God, and it is God who answers that problem. It is God who sets out the problem of God, and it is God who answers that problem. Any other way is fraught with risk.

Let’s see in today’s passage how God sets out the problem of God, and how He answers it.

So, Mark, chapter 1. When I first looked at this passage a few weeks ago, I thought, “Oh great, demons.” Demons are mentioned in seven of the 16 chapters of Mark, so they’re kind of important in the book. They might represent real, sinister spiritual “beings;” they might represent evil forces in society, such as greed, whether personal or institutional greed; they might just represent characters in the narrative of how people in the ancient world thought about the spiritual world. But rather than working through that now, it might be helpful to substitute another word used in New Testament to represent dangers to believers, namely, the word “powers.” We can think of these as cosmic powers or organizational powers or emotional powers such as hatred or anxiety or even our fear of the neighbor’s dog, who barks threateningly. Like it or not, powers have power over us.

Jesus restores Peter’s mother-in-law to health; the city hears about it and soon everyone is gathered the door. Jesus heals. Jesus casts out demons. In the end, when Jesus goes to a deserted place to pray, the disciples find Him, remind Him that everyone is looking for Him. When He tells them He has come to preach, off they all go throughout Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons. And what does it all mean? Jesus explains it in the 12th chapter of Matthew when the Pharisees accuse Him of driving out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the Prince of Demons. Jesus throws their insult back at them. “If I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out...? But if it is by the spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The same for healing. The same for preaching.

In the Bible, it is God who sets out the problem of God, and it is God who answers the problem. Healing people of diseases and casting out demons caused the people to ask questions about Jesus, but when they answered those questions themselves, they either flocked to Jesus out of a desire for material wholeness or condemned him as a fraud. Like Mr. Jones, they knew something

was happening—and they wanted part of it, but they didn't know what it was. Only God could answer the problem of God. Only God in Jesus could say that the casting out of demons meant a change in power, and a change in power meant a change in time. In the New Testament it's called the "kingdom of God" or the "new heaven and the new earth," or the "new age of the world." The answer of God to the problem of God was to send the Son to change time and change geography and change power. And in the book of Mark, the irony is that no one gets it. No one understands. *But that's okay.*

And there's more. The book of Hebrews describes believers as people who have "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" (Heb 6:5). People who have *tasted the powers of the coming age*. This change, this ability to say to the powers, "You don't have control over me anymore"—that's something that we have *tasted*. Note that verb. We've tasted it. Maybe not eaten the whole meal, but we've tasted it. *And that is enough.*

God sets out the problem of God. Because we can't. Like Mr. Jones, we really don't know what's happening. Like Madonna, we live in the material world. So God must set out the problem of Himself. But then God answers that problem, by sending Jesus and causing a shift in the time and the kingdom and the power, in power and by power and with power, power that *we can taste*.

And as God answers the problem of God, He has a *question* for us. A question. Because when God answers the problem of God and reveals Himself to be God and changes the time and the kingdom and the power, He reveals Himself as a God who is *for us*. A God who chooses to be *for us*. And His question is the same as it was in the 10th chapter of Mark to the blind man named Bartimaeus. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The answer of God to the problem of God, the problem that we in our material world cannot even ask, much less solve, is an answer that

contains in it this question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

So that's the question for us today, on this Super day. What do you want God to do for you? That's what the power of the coming age tastes like. What do you want God to do, for you? And I'd encourage you not to answer in a strictly material way, although I think God would forgive us for doing so. What do you want?

And it's totally okay to answer, "God, I have *no idea*. What do you think I want?"

Actually, one person in the book of Mark *does* get it. He speaks in exactly one sentence and he is neither disciple nor Pharisee nor working-class Jew. It is the centurion, who witnesses the death of Christ, in Mark 15. To quote Mark, "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39). One sentence. But he gets it. Because he witnessed the essential act in which God set forth the problem of God and then answered it. Because he witnessed the death of the man who was God but even in that death, that surrender, He did not cease to be God and therefore He proved Himself to be God. Because there was something in that death that was compellingly God. The centurion recognized God and tasted the power of the coming age and when God asked him at that moment, "What do you want?" the centurion answered, "I want to say that 'this man was the Son of God.'" And that was enough.

What do you want God to do for you?