

The role of a prophet is not to tell the future, but to point out how our present systems are barriers that get in the way of the wholeness of God's people and creation.

Theologian Verna Dozier calls this wholeness the Dream of God she says:

"The dream of God is that all creation will live together in peace and harmony and fulfillment. All parts of creation. And the dream of God is that the good creation that God created...will be restored,"

A prophet reveals the things that get in the way of fulfilling God's dream.

Our scriptures are full of stories that teach us how to live in a way that moves us toward the fulfillment of this dream. A prophet interrupts the false narratives that impede our wholeness and offers a new story to live from.

So what is the story we hear from Mark's gospel? I have to admit that for me the exorcism is distracting and almost makes me want to look away. But putting the story in context and digging into the language and the structure of it reveal more than is seen at first glance.

So the context is, in the flow of Mark's story Jesus has been baptized, spent his time in the wilderness, gathered his disciples and is now teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum. What happens next is his first public act of ministry.

The story begins with the reaction the people have to his teaching. They are stunned. Something that he is saying and the way he is saying it makes it clear to them that they are witnessing powerful teaching.

It is after this realization that a man with an unclean spirit shouts to him “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Jesus rebukes him, the spirit comes out of the man...and rather than saying they were astonished by the act of exorcism just witnessed, the people react again by pointing to the teaching:

²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new **teaching**—with authority!

What they are astonished by is that the teaching of Jesus has overcome evil, has broken down the debilitating barrier that the man is faced with on his journey toward wholeness.

This is something new, something surprising that they have not seen before in the synagogue.

This is a power shift. It's a challenge to and change in the power structures of their lives. In Jesus they see a prophet that not only speaks truth to power, but one who shifts the very ground of power that holds them captive.

And it's his teaching that astounds them, The verb to teach is used four times in this short passage. It is emphasized both in the introduction and the conclusion of the story.

Jesus taught with authority and power and through actions that made change possible. His words and actions and stories revealed God's power to liberate people from the oppressive forces dominating their lives.

Both the people in the story and the first listeners of this story were living in a time of enormous disparity in wealth. According to our EfM New Testament textbook we learned this week that 3 percent of the population owned the wealth leaving 97% of the population in poverty. About 28 percent of the population lived at or below subsistence levels.

Bread was a big deal because it was hard to come by and those who lived under the subsistence level had no way of knowing if they would in fact receive their daily bread. It was a not just a spiritual concern for them.

The tax burden was so oppressive that it sent people into poverty and kept them there. In the New Testament era it is estimated that between a fourth and a third of the population was enslaved. Some people voluntarily entered into slavery simply to ensure an adequate source of food. Almost the entire population had no hope of ever improving their prospects or saving for a disastrous turn of events.

So the story Mark tells is a story of the power of the teaching of Jesus that can change even a society with enormous power imbalances.

Is this still story we're living? Do we believe that the teaching of Jesus carries God's power to liberate and restore life? Do we see the imbalances of power that threaten God's creation?

In their book *Active Hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*, scholars Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone say:

"Recognizing that we can choose the story that we live from can be liberating; finding a good story to take part in adds to our sense of purpose and aliveness."

They describe the three main stories that are playing out in our time as:

1. Everything is fine, we can continue on with business as usual.
2. Our biological, economic and social systems are unraveling and in danger of spiraling out of control and there is nothing we can do about it.
3. We are experiencing a groundswell of response to this danger that is leading us to a transition to new era toward a life sustaining civilization.

If we live according to story number one, that everything is fine, it doesn't require much of us. It assumes the systems we have in place are fine and don't need changing.

If we live according to story number two: We might become so overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems we face that we become despondent and unwilling to respond to what we view as a hopeless cause.

If we live according to story number three: We are experiencing a groundswell of response that is leading us into a new era of a life sustaining civilization, we can move beyond ignorance and despair into hope.

This third option is the kind of paradigm shift described in our gospel reading today. A response that changes a hopeless situation through the power of God.

The authors call this change "The Great Turning".

The book describes three dimensions of the Great Turning:

1. Holding Actions, these are actions that defend life on earth.

2. Building Life sustaining systems and practices, these are the new social and economic systems we are creating.

And

3. A shift in consciousness, a change in our perception, thinking and values.

I can see all of these elements present in the teaching of Jesus. His holding actions are things like speaking out against evil, turning over the tables of the money changers, resisting the temptations in the wilderness.

Jesus advocates for new social systems and practices, turning all of our expectations upside down. Privileging the outcast, and the weak over the strong and powerful.

Speaking to people who were rejected by the community, healing the untouchables, eating with tax collectors and sinners...all these things speak to rearranging the rules to break down the false barriers we create to make certain people the outsiders in order to rationalize our neglect of their needs.

Jesus teaches us to shift our collective consciousness, to change our perception, thinking and values. Just one parable can upend our thinking and rearrange the way we meet difficult situations in life with no easy answers.

What is the story you are living from? What are the stories that blind us, cripple us and possess us? What are the stories of our faith that liberate us? That have the power to lead toward the fulfillment of God's dream?

