

Sermon: "Parables according to Mark, part two: Secrets"
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for June 14th 2015 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Mark 4: 10-12

One of the true gifts of the Old Testament...at least from where I stand...one of that ancient volumes true gifts, is found in the series of dramatic call stories...call stories...that fill its pages. I'm thinking, for instance, of the call—in a sense the multiple calls—of Abraham, one of which (in the most explicit way) is also a call to Sarah. I'm thinking of the call of Moses at the foot of the Burning Bush. I'm thinking of the call of the boy Samuel serving in the shrine. And yes, I'm thinking of the big-ticket calls recorded in the three largest prophetic books: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah.

Isaiah's call is the one of particular interest for us, this morning. Unlike the calls to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which are found right at the start of their respective books, the call to Isaiah doesn't make its appearance until chapter six. But what an appearance it is! The year of King Uzziah's death; Isaiah serving in the Temple! The sanctuary comes to life; angels surround the throne of God and cry out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!" With that, Isaiah recognizes his own sinful state, as well as the sinful state of his people. God quickly moves to cleanse the young man's lips, at which point Isaiah agrees to serve as God's messenger. But then, just when both he and we are ready to shout our joyous acclamation...sing our alleluias and amen's...Isaiah is given a more precise look at his job description.

*"Go and say to this people, keep listening but do **not** comprehend; keep looking but do **not** understand. Make the mind of this people dull; stop their ears; shut their eyes: so that they may **not** look with their eyes and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their mind, and turn and be healed."* And yes: you heard that correctly: make the mind of this people dull...so that they may **not**...turn and be healed. Ah yes! Nothing like being in Church on a Sunday morning, to give you that much needed spiritual uplift!

* * * * *

In truth...in truth: those uncomfortable words from Isaiah...

...words which purport to be not Isaiah's own words, not even the words of one of the angels, but God's own words...

...I suspect those words from Isaiah are words with which we would not likely be familiar were it not for one even more uncomfortable fact,

namely that Jesus—**our** Jesus—makes these words his own: not only in Mark, but in Matthew and in Luke. It's no distortion—it's not really even an exaggeration—to state that most of us (including yours truly) would probably be oblivious to those words, were they only found in Isaiah. It's not that we bypass the Old Testament; it's just that we tend to make highly selective use of its contents, adept as we are at bracketing out those sections that strike us as too obscure, too harsh, or simply too weird! However!

When our Lord, himself, shines a light on a particular passage from the Old Testament...when he makes use of that passage in a way that that appears to parallel its original intent, it's pretty hard to walk-on-by without at least wondering what would prompt him to do that. And yes, Jesus—having just told the parable of the sower and the seed...

...a parable we'll have a close look at next Sunday...

...having just told that parable to a mixed group of disciples, interested bystanders and those who were merely curious, Jesus subsequently offers an explanation to the disciples and the interested ones, as to **why** he's telling parables. And yes: given the fact that we have launched into a multi-part examination of a large chunk of those parables it would be hard for us not to take an interest in what is, when push comes to shove, the only explanation Jesus offers as to why he tells parables. Alas: the explanation he offers echoes, in all kinds of disturbing ways, the explanation God offers to Isaiah at the time of Isaiah's call. Listen again.

*And he said to them: "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but **not** perceive, and may indeed listen, but **not** understand, so that they may **not** turn again and be forgiven."*

And you know: I must confess that I had this fantasy, over the past week, of myself following Jesus around Galilee during the early days of his ministry, having been assigned the job of serving as his marketing director. I can imagine myself summoning up the courage to have a word with him! It might go something like this.

"Lord? I realize it wasn't your idea to have a marketing director on staff...but might I make a little suggestion."

Having taken his silence as permission to continue, I might then find myself saying. "You know, I think things are going real well out here on the road! You're doing a terrific job. In fact, you're doing such a terrific job, that you're making my job easy. Thanks for that."

Since people back then didn't wear wrist-watches, I'm sure our Lord would have found some other way of communicating the fact that he had only so much time for this nonsense. And so I would continue in this way:

"As I was saying, Lord, everything is going well...but I do wish...(now please hear me out, don't take this personally)...I do wish you'd lose that bit about the parables. I don't mean that you shouldn't **tell** parables! As far as I'm concerned they're a terrific idea. But can you please lose that bit about **why** you tell the parables. You see: I've been doing market research, and I've yet to find a single demographic that likes the explanation you've got on offer. You're not gonna win friends and you're certainly not going to influence people with that stuff...not on your life. Not on your life!"

* * * * *

Well...the fact of the matter is: we are not the first...and no doubt we won't be the last...to find Jesus' words here not just perplexing but highly unnerving. Rare is the commentator on Mark who does not experience the need to make at least some attempt at softening these words, contextualizing these words, so as to take away at least some of their sting. Trust me. It's not easily done. And the fact is: there's something here we ignore at our peril, especially at the start of a stretch in which we will, in fact, be looking at many of the parables. If Jesus here offers an explanation as to why he tells parables, it would be foolish to ignore him. And if that explanation involves the claim that the parables are meant to be hard to comprehend, that too would be foolish to ignore. So bear with me...bear with me as I offer a handful of thoughts.

I suppose...I suppose the very first thing that ought to be said, is that Jesus here rather effectively demolishes the cliché that the parables are best regarded as little ditties told for the amusement and education of the simple folk, those too dull to understand a more abstract way of preaching the Gospel. Here, as perhaps nowhere else in the Gospels, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the parables are not easy to interpret; makes it clear that even his own closest followers don't often "get" them, at least not without a bit of prodding from him. And so we ought not to be embarrassed over the coming weeks when we wrestle with one of these parables, find ourselves interpreting them in more than one way, find ourselves struggling to find even one coherent interpretation or worse still, find ourselves uncomfortable with the interpretation we hit upon. None of that should surprise us.

And none of that ought to surprise us, in part, because the Kingdom whose secret...whose mystery...the parables seek to illumine, is the Kingdom of the God who continually reminded Ancient Israel: *"My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts."* How could a set of parables seeking to

unlock the secret, the mystery, of such a Kingdom, of such a God, possibly be easily understood by the likes of you and me?

For that matter, consider the complexity of the world God made! When I read articles describing, say, our present knowledge of the human cell...or our present knowledge of particle physics...the fact that I was a high-school science major back in the late-sixties, doesn't mean a thing. The advances in our knowledge over the past 50 years have been nothing short of breath-taking: and they have rendered a world not simpler than the world we thought we understood back then, but a world far more complex and mysterious than anything we might have dreamt in the 20th century, let alone the seemingly clock-work world Isaac Newton taught us to imagine back in the 18th century. As Northrop Frye once put it with his characteristic elegance: the more science discovers, the more the world in which we live appears to be not so much a grand thing, but rather a remarkable idea! And yes, how could we—who believe that our world is a created world—how could we imagine that we would instantly master the mystery of the One who conceived this world of wonders. Hardly surprising that the parables, far from offering easy answers, invite us to wrestle with a mystery we will never fully grasp. All the same!

All the same: there's no wishing away the fact that the Lord Jesus, in seeking to account for his use of parables, chose to take upon his own lips, seemingly harsh words from Isaiah: words spoken not by Isaiah, but by God. Words that appear to despair of ancient Israel ever finding its way back to God; words which, when found on Christ's own lips, appear to despair of those on the outside ever finding their way home. In short, words which take their place side-by-side with all of the **other** tough sayings found on the lips of our Lord: words about the sword he came to bring, words about turning parents and children against one other, words about sins so rank that they simply cannot be forgiven. What I dare not do is pretend those words are ones I need not hear; they speak with far too much urgency for me to dismiss them so casually. But what I also dare not do, is presume those words are Christ's final verdict on those whose life he came to share. More to the point, given that so many of Christ's words—and yes, so many of Christ's deeds—contain within them all kinds of tensions, sticking points and unresolved questions, surely it's fair for us to ask whether his own thinking about these matters did not develop over the course of his ministry: entirely fair for us to ask whether he did not, in the end, come to the conviction that God's mercies are wider and broader and deeper than he might have ever permitted himself to imagine at the start to his ministry.

I'm reminded...reminded of an incident Mark offers to us much later in his Gospel...near the end, really, as Jesus and his travelling companions find themselves approaching Jerusalem. A wealthy man comes to Jesus and is told to sell all he owns so that he can follow the Lord. His response? He turns away, head down, heart sunken, devastated at his inability to follow so tough a command. Turning to his disciples, Jesus comments that the man's reaction is a

perfect illustration as to why it will be so very hard for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom. When they, by way of response, ask him in astonishment—*“But who then can be saved?”* his answer could not be more instructive.

“For man it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

May this God, the God who came to us in Jesus, the God with whom all things are possible: may this, our God, make even the seemingly impossible things come to fruition. That the secret of the Kingdom...that the deep mystery of the Kingdom...might open to us this very day. This day...and always!

In Jesus' name! Amen!!