

Breathless

Just the other day my son told me about a 14 year old boy, the younger brother of his friend, who took a bong rip, which he translated for me as smoking marijuana, while on a camping trip – and the 14-year-old had some kind of allergic reaction to it – and suddenly died.

His brother had to carry him down the mountain trail.

I can't imagine how Joey's friend felt; or the young boy's folks.

And then came the news of Billy Kanoi, the former mayor of the Big Island, who died at the far too young age of 52, from cancer.

Many of us remember Billy as the poster boy for the Big Island.

Gregarious, always happy, always joking, and sometimes getting himself into trouble.

And finally, last Sunday's New York Times magazine devoted almost the entire issue to that significant minority of people who get Covid – and never fully recover, as they experience difficult symptoms for months and months.

All of these tragedies are stark reminders of the brevity and fragility of life.

How, on any given morning, your life or mine can be forever changed in ways that we never anticipated.

And I'm wondering if life's uncertainty is what explains why Mark chose to write his gospel in the way he did.

Mark's gospel is probably the earliest one written down.

It's by far the shortest of the four Gospels.

And it reads like a dime store novel, one that moves at breakneck speed.

His favorite word is "immediately" – and he uses it constantly.

Just in chapter 1, where we've been hanging out lately, there's Jesus, showing up, getting baptized, then forced into the desert to confront his demons, then walking into a synagogue and throwing out demons – as the whole town stands around, their jaws on the ground.

And we're barely halfway through chapter 1!

Not only does this gospel move at breakneck speed, it ends like a Hollywood cliffhanger.

The faithful women show up after the crucifixion, at the crack of dawn, only to find an empty tomb!

And a young man dressed in white, who's telling them "Jesus isn't here, he's risen!"

The faithful women are told to report this news to the other disciples, but instead, they run away, terrified.

The End.

It's like the latest Netflix series, where you're left to wait for the next season.

In fact, ancient writers were so distraught at how Mark ends his gospel, that some of those writers add a new ending to his gospel, taking pieces from Matthew and Luke, to try to give it some finality.

But Mark isn't about finality.

Mark is about holding life and death and faith in tension.

And in these days now, when so much of life seems uncertain, we can say to Mark:

Thank you!

Thank you for being real.

Thank you for being true to our human condition.

It's the kind of truth that the people hear in Jesus' voice as he's teaching in their synagogue this morning.

We don't know what he's saying.

But whatever it is, it's amazing, because, to its core, it's authentic.

It's real.

It rings true.

Something in what Jesus is saying draws inexorably out of every person a "Yes" — or a "No."

And so "you either go with the man and help him create the holy chaos he's creating or you find a way to do everything you can to

stop this Jesus, so you can get your people back in line." B. Blount, Preaching Mark in Two Voices, 33.

That self-same choice confronts you and I today:

What say we to this Jesus?

And what about that fellow who's possessed by the evil spirit?

In Hawaii, we know about spirits.

Who hasn't brushed up against the night walkers at least once in their life?

Sacred places, like Kalaupapa, are thick with spirits.

And don't forget the every day spirits.

Who among us has escaped the assault on calm thinking, on kindness, by a spirit of jealousy, envy or greed?

These spirits invade our lives, often with a regularity that is painful to admit.

They can lead us into behavior that is deeply regretted.

And these are not the only spirits with which we contend.

There are spirits that infest our institutions.

Spirits that demand an eye for an eye.

Spirits that justify the grotesque accumulation of wealth by a few when so many live in dire need.

Spirits of demagoguery, stoked by fear.

These are the powers and principalities that St. Paul warns about.

Spirits that can blind us to the joy and abundance that God intends for us on this good earth.

If only we are content with enough.

If only we will share.

And so it is that in his very first chapter, Mark assures us that in Jesus, we have a redeemer who is stronger than any of those spirits.

In Jesus, we have a friend who stands ready to free us from their snares.

“Christ shatters the domineering designs that shackle people to lower standards of life than God intends.

Christ frees us from the demons of prejudice and pride, greed and guile.

Christ stands with us, whenever we gather, his saving power among us, blossoming!

And if we devote ourselves to anything less than this gift of divine destiny, we’ll miss out on all the fun!” D. Lose, modified.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Isn't that our question today, as pandemic, racial strife and economic hardship batter our shores?

Will this new virus strain keep us forever locked down?

Will our economy ever recover?

Will we at long last find a way to solidarity with the least, the lost and the left behind?

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

In the weeks to come, Mark hurries us along as Jesus invites tax collectors and prostitutes, and all kinds of outsiders, to dine with him.

He welcomes people no self-respecting holy man would be caught dead with.

Thank God!

Even folks like me.

Even folks like you.

The tearing open of the heavens over the Jordan, signaling heaven coming to earth, the sacred and the profane embracing, becomes the first course of that banquet promised so long ago by God through the prophet Isaiah:

[When] the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food ... of well-aged wines...

And he will destroy ... the shroud that is cast over all peoples
... he will swallow up death forever.

And wipe away the tears from all faces ... for the Lord has spoken.
(Isa. 25:6-8)

It's a banquet open to **anyone** who is willing to sit down with **everyone**.

A banquet made possible by what Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls the "wonderfully **low standards** of Jesus."

And for us today, gathered as we are, with our annual meeting to immediately follow our service, it is for us a chance to reflect on how we are living out our faith.

Read through the reports, from Wallyhouse to the Altar Guild, from Food Pantry to the Sr. Warden's reflections.

As your Rector, as your friend, there is so much in our common life together for which we all of us can say: thank you.

Thank you Lord for the opportunity to serve so many of the neediest in our neighborhood.

Thank you for our elders who bring to us so much wisdom and experience and deep commitment to the life and ministry of this church.

Thank you for our children and young adults, for they are the future of this church.

And if the pace of ministry at St E's sometimes seems breathless, even exhausting, perhaps we can take heart that in Mark, we have a brother.

A brother not content with easy answers.

A brother, who reminds us that the good news of Jesus Christ is urgent news for an anxious world.

News we are compelled to announce!

News we are compelled to live!

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