

Gospel Estrangement

John 7:1-10; Mark 3:20-35

So we've started this year looking at what the New Testament teaches us, first about the life and then about the teaching of James, one of the four younger brothers that grew up with the Lord Jesus in the homes that Joseph and Mary made for their children, first in Bethlehem, then in Egypt and then finally back in Nazareth, the same remote, hillside village where the archangel had first stunned Mary with the news that she would give birth to a Savior, the first of a number of announcements that Mary would struggle with at first, but then "*treasure in her heart*" it says in Luke's gospel.

And we've remarked that the stories of Jesus' childhood alternated between wonderful on the one hand, with angels and shepherds, prophets and wise men and a great, beaming star, and terrifying on the other hand, with a tyrant and his assassins hot on Jesus' trail. But for the most part I imagine that Jesus' childhood and most of his adulthood was just ordinary. I imagine his mother and stepfather were devout, likely active in the village synagogue, devout, but probably not too high flown.

After all, Joseph was a woodworker, likely fashioning furniture and cabinets, doors and shutters for customers within a day's walk of his woodshop. And Mary had to feed and clothe five boys with some number of girls interspersed among them, every meal made from scratch, every garment made by hand, meat from the herds and vegetables from the garden and spices hand ground and hand sprinkled.

By which I mean to say that Jesus and his brothers and sisters came from no kind of dreamy, otherworldly environment. It was far more likely that chores abounded and children learned practical skills early and, should anyone fail at planting or weeding or sewing or cooking or tending or carving, if anyone failed, everyone did without, and which likely meant you heard what you'd missed, or what your mistake cost the person who had to clean your mess or do over what you forgot.

Which I'm guessing might have been a trial for Jesus, a young boy trying to digest this growing sense that he was not quite like his brothers, not really a carpenter's son, but that his Father was in heaven and that he had been born for something different and bigger and more important than getting a cabinet door on straight. We've already seen Jesus in Luke's gospel, a twelve year old at his first Passover, getting so caught up in Jerusalem's temple with Israel's priests that he missed the caravan home and cost his parents several anxious days trying to find him.

Only to respond to Mary's scolding with a statement that must have stunned his parents and the priests alike, "*Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I'd be at my Father's house?*" No harm meant, no disrespect intended but if I'm Joseph, Jesus would get an earful and maybe more the moment they were out that room. Now Luke is careful tell us that Jesus "*was submissive*" to his mother and stepfather as a way of life. But there was no way to be God's Only Begotten in a village woodshop without occasionally losing step with his brothers and his stepfather.

Now with that story, Joseph disappears from the gospels. Most Christians have thought that he passed away while Jesus was still a young man in the woodshop. Which leads us to the passages about Jesus and his brothers we read in our Call to Worship and our Scripture Lesson today. We think that Jesus showed up on the Jordan River to be baptized by John when he was around thirty years of age, which makes it likely that he had worked between fifteen and twenty years beside his brothers in the family woodshop. Because old Israel practiced a faith in which duty to family, building on your parent's legacy, was second only to loyalty and service to God himself. *That's why the parable of the Prodigal Son was so shocking when Jesus told it!*

But even at the age of twelve, Jesus was working toward an understanding that his own real Father would one day call him away to a different, even more important family business, saving the world from the tragedy and folly of sin. So, when Jesus was baptized, and the Spirit visibly descended and his Father in heaven declared, "*You are my Son whom I love and in whom I delight.*", once all that was said and done, that was the end of Jesus, the village carpenter from Nazareth. The gospels tell us that: "*The Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness.*"

And from that moment on there was an empty bench in the family woodshop, an empty place at the family table. The man that John the Baptist and the first of the disciples had seen as Israel's Messiah, perhaps because they'd seen the Spirit descend and heard the voice from heaven, the man who would soon draw crowds of disciples away from their lives and their work was likely seen by his mother and his brothers as something of a prodigal son. Because the brothers of Jesus were Joseph's sons. The woodshop was their father's house.

And the point of the passage we've just heard is that the priorities we make in life, the moral decisions we make and the spiritual direction we head all take as their launching pad what we make of this man Jesus, born and raised in an ordinary human family, trained to take up an ordinary human profession, and yet at the same time God's own eternally begotten Son, anointed by God's Spirit and identified by God's own voice as the one Savior on whom all our eternal destinies depend.

His mother and brothers, still feeling abandoned and betrayed by his absence, couldn't see that. Our passage tells us that they thought he was "*out of his mind*". The scribes, scholars called down from Jerusalem, couldn't see it either. They thought he was a demonic clairvoyant, conning the faithful away from their work and their families and their synagogues. "*Beelzebul has him!*", they said, "*By the prince of demons, he casts out demons!*"

So his family thought Jesus was deluded, that their dreamy, heaven obsessed, older brother had lost the handle on real life. The scribes took it a step further and saw him as a deluder, a demonic charlatan rearranging demonic spells to make himself look like a liberator. But Jesus knew who he was! And so in Mark's gospel he calls the scribes together to debrief their theory that the Savior who was busy undoing the consequences of sin, healing disease and exorcising demons and liberating souls in bondage, that the Savior could somehow be the agent of the devil.

And, of course, it all hinged on whether who Jesus was and what Jesus taught and what Jesus did was genuine. Because there were then and there still are today phony clairvoyants, claiming spiritual powers they don't have, promising a liberation that isn't real, and teaching a gospel that isn't true. But Jesus was and still is the real thing. Where Jesus went the demons really did scatter, the people Jesus healed really were well, the gospel Jesus taught really is true. The Spirit really had descended on him, the voice of the Father really had identified him.

So Jesus' opening point was that Satan wouldn't participate in the genuine destruction of his kingdom. "*How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand!...And if Satan has risen against himself and is divided, he cannot stand and has met his end!*" And the heart of Jesus' argument is that Satan's kingdom is not divided and has not come to an end. Satan's kingdom was then and still is absolutely unified in its subtle, deceptive, undermining opposition to everything Christ is and every-thing Christ stands for.

So the genuine damage Satan's kingdom suffers wherever the Spirit and power and gospel of Jesus takes hold could not have been engineered by Satan. Something different was going on here! And Jesus spells it out. "*But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder the house!*" And the point here is that Satan is not to be underestimated. He is the "*strong man*" to whom Adam gave the deed for the physical universe.

In Ephesians 2, Paul will describe Satan as "*the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the children of disobedience*". Much of the absurdity that characterizes our history can be traced to Satan. The devil is no pushover, Jesus teaches, nor is he fool enough to genuinely liberate anyone under his power. But the point of Christ's miracles was to demonstrate that, in Jesus, Satan has met his match. Jesus is the one sent by God to liberate

exiles and prisoners and hostages from the strong man's power, as was long ago prophesied by Isaiah in chapters 49 and 53.

John the Apostle, in Revelation 3, verse 7, will describe Jesus as "*the ...One who has the key of David, who opens a door and no one can shut it...*". This picture also was prophesied by Isaiah in chapter 22. So here in Mark, what Jesus is saying in so many words, is that I've just used my master key and entered the strong man's house and I've tied him up and I'm freeing souls from his power and cruelty.

That's what going here, he tells the scribes. So Jesus ministry in Galilee, healing disease and liberating souls and teaching a gospel that will set his kingdom in motion is essentially a raid on the strong man's house, a message to Satan that his days are numbered. But the scribes didn't want, wouldn't hear the message. *Because they were the scribes, they ruled the synagogue!*

Because with success and knowledge and power comes the temptation to only see a Savior and only hear a gospel that will leave us as we are, successful and certain and in charge. A Savior who sees sin in our successes, who finds error in our thinking, who wants to rule our lives and set our paths will never find a welcome in a self-satisfied heart. When we imagine that we're noble, the person who wants to save us becomes our enemy. The gospel that would set us right becomes nonsense.

So the scribes were mired in that state of heart where they would rather be right than be saved, rather be certain than to wrestle with a God they thought they'd tamed, they would rather rule their own realm than serve and obey in a kingdom where Jesus rules. And so they squinted at his miracles and they saw a devil at work, demons in play, sorcery and con-artistry in the Son God loved and the Spirit God sent. It was just like Jesus told his brothers in John's gospel: "*The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about the world that its deeds are evil.*"

The heartbreaking burden a Savior must carry is convincing self-satisfied people that they need to be saved. As often as not, they'll hate you for it. "*I tell you the truth,*" Jesus said, "*all the sins of the children of men will be forgiven, and all the blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.*"

I can remember as a young teenager driving across the country in the back of my parent's car, seeing a billboard sign that asked, "Are You Saved?" I laughed to myself. I'm in the back of a car! I'm not drowning! It wasn't until a year later on a cot, in my own dry basement, that I realized a person could spiritually drown. And looked up at the wooden beams and asked God to throw me a lifeline.

And a few months later I found myself at an ice cream counter, praying a prayer my friend had shown me in the back of a tract. The funny thing was that the same friend had shown me the same tract a year earlier, and I'd laughed in his face. Because I wasn't drowning. A year before I was fine, successful enough, thought I knew enough, wanted what I wanted and didn't want any gospel to hold me on a straight and narrow.

Now was that the blasphemy of the Spirit? No. Scoffing at Christ for a moment, resisting his Spirit, disbelieving his gospel isn't The Blasphemy until it hardens into a way of life. But it is a risky thing to turn from Jesus when he comes calling. Because we don't know if he'll come calling again. It is just the goodness of God that his Spirit softens our hearts when we would rather stay hard and proud. Which brings us to the brothers of Jesus, laughing up their sleeves and taunting Jesus to go to Jerusalem and actually do what everybody thought a Messiah ought to be up to.

They weren't the slightest bit tempted to leave their father's woodshop, and take their brother as a Savior and his gospel as a way of life. It was just God's goodness that James and Jude would come around and believe in Jesus after the resurrection. The danger of scoffing at Jesus, disregarding his Spirit, disbelieving what his Bible says is that none of us knows when or even if we'll come around. None of us ever would if God's Spirit didn't intervene and convince us that sin is wrong and God is right and we are drowning and need to be saved.

"Who are my brothers and sisters and mothers" Jesus asked. *"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* The point here is that the Son God loves is no one to take lightly. The Spirit God sent, his miracles and promises, the gospel and the commands he inspired are nothing to scoff at or take lightly. Only God's Spirit will ever convince our hearts to let Jesus be Lord.