

“The Longest Journey”**June 16, 2019****Mark 1:21-28**

This morning’s Scripture is taken from Mark 1:21-28:

Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum. When the Sabbath day came, he went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority – quite unlike the teachers of religious law.

Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”

But Jesus reprimanded him. “Be quiet! Come out of the man,” he ordered. At that, the evil spirit screamed, threw the man into a convulsion, and then came out of him.

Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. “What sort of new teaching is this?” they asked excitedly. “It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!” The news about Jesus spread quickly throughout the entire region of Galilee.

(Mark 1:21-28)

May God bless the reading of His Holy Word.

So, *Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum*. As I said, it was a town of great wealth, and a town of great sin and decadence. Why is it that great wealth and great sin and decadence frequently seem to be common bedfellows? Well, Paul gives us a little bit of an insight in 1 Timothy 6:9-10 when he writes:

But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.

(1 Timothy 6:9-10)

And when it comes to the love of money, no one is immune. It can affect anyone, even those most familiar with 1 Timothy, as well as other Scriptures. Do you remember Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker?



Some of you might be a little too young to remember the Bakkers, but the Bakkers were televangelists in the 70s and 80s, and they were very good at what they did. They amassed quite a ministry and built a headquarters for their ministry in the Carolinas called “Heritage Village.” Over time they expanded their ministry into areas of fun, and they built something called “Heritage USA,” an amusement park with rides, and waterpark, and the whole nine yards. Unbelievably, Heritage USA was the third largest theme park in the country by attendance. With five million visitors per year, Heritage USA was only behind Disney World in Florida, and Disney Land in California. It was a safe place, where Christians could take their families on vacation.

The problem was, Reverend Jim Bakker fell to the temptation for the love of money, and it was never enough. He ended up overselling the number of rooms that he had, which were timeshare kind of situations, way beyond capacity, amongst a bunch of other things; and by the time Bakker was arrested for fraud and received a forty-five year prison sentence in 1989, the IRS could not account for 92 million dollars in revenue. Now, I know 92 million dollars sounds like a lot, but I punched it into a calculator to figure out for inflation, and 92 million dollars in 1989 is the equivalent of 190 million dollars today. So, when the IRS finally showed up at Heritage USA and audited the books, they could not account for basically 200 million dollars, gone.

The ministry's operations were in near financial collapse; the Bakkers, however, were able to sustain quite a lavish lifestyle. Mrs. Bakker, Tammy Faye, is famous for having an air-conditioned doghouse for her dogs to stay in. Both had annual salaries of one and a half million dollars each, 3 million dollars in today's money. So, they're taking in six million dollars a year, plus benefits! Benefits like free utilities, and that's going to come important in a minute. They had an expense account for food. They had an expense account for clothing. So, when you're pulling in six million dollars per year, and you don't have to pay your utilities, and you don't have to pay for your food, and you don't have to pay for your clothing (I think I need to renegotiate my contract!), you really are doing well for yourself! Among the possessions that the IRS grabbed were a 55-foot houseboat, a \$45,000 Mercedes Benz, a \$55,000 1953 Rolls Royce, diamonds and gold jewelry, and various homes and apartments in South Carolina, Tennessee, as well as Palm Springs and Highland Florida. That's where the utilities benefit comes in pretty well. They were living high on the hog, and they both fell to the temptation of money. Great wealth frequently follows with great sin and decadence.

Now, I am not saying in any way that there are not good rich Christian people. There are, and you certainly can be wealthy and a faithful follower of Jesus. I would love to try it someday myself. But I have noticed over my life, I don't know if you have picked this up either, it seems in places like Haiti, the poorest country in the southern hemisphere, you would be amazed at the depth of the faith that you encounter there. I mean, they don't have anything. They struggle every single day to put food on the table.



They have to walk sometimes up to five miles to get fresh water. They don't have several outfits or closets full of clothes. Ramshackle homes. The poverty is striking when you first encounter it, and I will never forget when we were worshipping with our sister church in Camp Perrin, just the level of faith. They're singing songs to Jesus, and praying, and praising the Lord, and you're just amazed! These people have nothing! And then, at one point in the service, they picked up offering plates, and I'm saying to myself, "Really? You're going to ask these people for money?" Yeah. They went up and down just like we did. And to my amazement, people put money in! Because they knew it was an obligation of a Christian, a promise that we make to support the building of His kingdom. The level of faith just amazes you amongst the poorest of the poor, it really does.

Now, in contrast to that, between Massachusetts and Connecticut, there are 35 billionaires. Billionaires, with a B! Thirty-five, between the two states of Connecticut and Massachusetts. And yet, according to a pew research poll that ranked all fifty states by how religious they were, Massachusetts and Connecticut came in fiftieth and forty-seventh. In fact, wait until you see how New England does. Vermont and Maine – tied for forty-eighth. New Hampshire – tied with Massachusetts for last place. Our superstar in New England is Rhode Island, at thirty-five. But five out of the six New England states are holding up the bottom. We are the worse of the worst when it comes to faith; and yet we have some of the wealthiest of the wealthy in the Northeast, in New England. It appears as if once people have attained a certain level of financial security, we start to believe that, I don't know, we are masters of our own destiny! We begin putting our faith in ourselves and our riches. There's no need for a deity. We are in control.

The interesting thing is, the church actually grows fastest in nations where it is being persecuted. It's true. You know where some of the fastest growing churches are in the world? China, where it's illegal unless you go to a state-sanctioned church that can only teach state-sanctioned things. You open up an independent church? You'll get shut down. And yet, the Christian church is burgeoning in China. You know, one of the other places where the Christian church is experiencing great growth, check this out – IRAN! Where it can bring a death sentence! The Christian church in Iran is growing leaps and bounds. Despite severe persecution, do you know where the Christian church has increased tenfold over the last forty years? Today, the steadfast and resilient Christian church in South Sudan is one of the fastest growing in the world.

Why is that? Well, it seems as though when things are dire, when things are really tough, we tend to turn to the Lord. Is that no true? When there's a car accident, whether you're a practicing Christian or not, or a believer or not, when you're rushing to the hospital, most people are saying, "Lord, please let my loved one be okay." All of a sudden, we find God in the direst of circumstances – when we are being persecuted; when we have nothing. Conversely, and sadly, when things are going well in our lives, we frequently tend to forget all about Him. He's not necessary, because we have control. We're doing well, we've got it all covered, we don't need Him.

Well, as I said, Capernaum was a thriving town with great wealth. It was also a headquarters to a lot of Roman garrisons, and that meant a lot of pagan influence. You see, Rome basically ruled the world at this time, and you got Roman soldiers from all parts of the world – from the east, from Egypt, from Africa, and from the west – everywhere. So, you got all kinds of a variety of Roman soldier, and they brought with them their culture, and they brought with them their faith. So, there was a wide plethora of different faiths being practiced in Capernaum. A wealthy city; a lot of sin and decadence; a variety of different faiths. This is an ideal place for Jesus to challenge people with the Good News of the gospel.

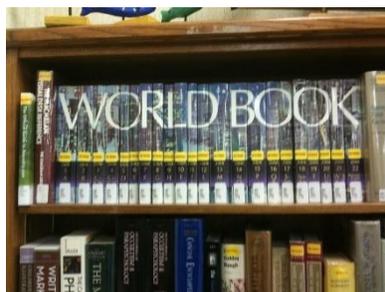
I've mentioned previously, when I was traveling back and forth to school in Georgia – Georgia on that list comes in like third in the percentage of people who are religious – you couldn't throw a rock in any direction and not hit a church with a huge parking lot and a thousand-member congregation.



It was everywhere. And I've got to admit, there was a part of me that became a little bit envious of my classmates. I knew they were going back to serve their church in a climate where if you walked out front and stuck a sign in the ground, you were going to have a hundred people that Sunday. And I was coming back to New England. It is much, much harder to grow a church in New England. I don't have to tell you guys.

However, that's why it's so important that we're here. New England needs it worse than Georgia. These people need to hear the Good News of the gospel. That's what Jesus did. He moved back to Capernaum – a town of great wealth, a town of great sin and decadence, a town with a variety of faiths – and He said, "I'm going to share with them the Good News of the gospel." So, what does He do? First thing He does, He goes straight to the synagogue and He begins teaching. In verse 22 it said, *the people were amazed at his teaching; for he taught with real authority – quite unlike the teachers of religious law.* You see, at this time, a lot of the preaching was not – I don't want to say authoritative.

Remember, years ago, folks, we used to look at these things called encyclopedias. Remember those?



Anybody have a set of encyclopedias at home? (Nobody raised their hand who was under the age of fifty, I just want to tell you that!) Well, encyclopedias were a collection of information about the world. I have in my office six different sets of encyclopedias – religious encyclopedias – called commentaries. And what commentaries are, are a bunch of a scholars, religious experts, would get together and they would read the Scripture, and they would break it down verse by verse, and then they would fill up these volumes of what they believed the context, the message – you know, information about that verse. Like going into an encyclopedia to learn about something, you would go to the commentaries to learn about something. Now, as I said, I have six different sets, and I used them a lot more when I first got into the ministry than I do now. I've been doing this for twenty-two years, so I use it less and less. But still, it's a great resource to open up, to view some of the giants in our field. And every once in a while, you'll get, "Gosh, you know, I never thought of it from that point of view!" So, they're awesome.

But my point is this: in the first century, what a lot of preaching being done in the synagogue were rabbis that would stand up and simply quote other rabbis. It's as if you'd sit here and give a message and say, "Well, you know, it says... because Rabbi So-and-So said..." They never said anything original! They were just pulling from the commentaries, which in Judaism you call the Mishnah.

So, Jesus comes along, and He is His own commentary! He's not quoting anyone else. He is telling it like it is, like it's firsthand information. And the people are a little bit like, "Wow, whoa, this is different! He is speaking without the backup of all these other previous rabbis. He's speaking from the heart, and it is piercing my heart." He is speaking with such authority, that it made a big impression on them.

In the middle of His preaching, in verse 23, *suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out...* In the middle of teaching, somebody cried out possessed by an evil spirit. If he was possessed by an evil spirit, I can't even imagine what he possibly could have said. Jesus meets the issue head on, and He heals him. He sets him free. The people were amazed. Verse 27: *Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. "What sort of new teaching is this?" they asked excitedly. "It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!"*

And this was just the beginning. If you continue to read on in the Gospel of Mark, you will find that Jesus was on a roll. In verse 29, He leaves the synagogue. He goes to the home of Simon Peter and heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who was ill – for which Peter never forgave Him. Just kidding! I always do that joke, because it's just so obvious! So, He heals Peter's mother-in-law, and then in verse 39 it says:

So he traveled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.

(Mark 1:39)

So, He's setting a bunch of other people free. Then He heals a man with leprosy. Then in chapter 2, He heals a man who was paralyzed.



And then in chapter 3, He heals a man with a deformed hand. Jesus is just on a roll! And the reaction? More amazement? More belief? More converts?

At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus.

(Mark 3:6)

Fascinating response, isn't it? Did you notice when Susan was reading the Scripture this morning that back in verse 24, the evil spirit cried out, *"Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"* The evil spirit recognized who Jesus was: The Holy One of God. The Pharisees want to kill Him, even with all the miracles. Between setting this man free and their response, they reject who Jesus is. They doubt who Jesus is. They question who Jesus is.

Sometimes the longest journey someone can take is the twelve to eighteen inches between the head and the heart. You see, faith is a heart decision, not a head decision. The Bible says you will not know Him, you will never know Him (Jesus), through human wisdom. I will never be able to show you a picture, some video, or a recording. You need to believe in your heart. We say, "I believe!" when our hearts are changed. We even use the phrase ourselves, in our everyday conversation. You know, ever said this? "I believe you honey! I really do! I believe you with all of my heart!" You ever said, "I believe you with all of my head!" No! Belief comes from the heart, not the head.

Now, I know there are always going to be some who will say, "Sure, but it's easier when you're looking at all these miracles. When Jesus is running around the area doing all these crazy things, sure! It's easier to believe." Well, do we not believe that these stories are true? Or do we? Are we doubting Thomases? Thomas, who said, "I'm not going to believe until I see the holes in His hands, and I put my hand in His side!" Is that us?



Is it that we don't think miracles like this still happen today? Because we would be wrong. I want to share two quick stories with you, from my newsfeed. First one I came across on June 02. About fourteen years ago, Reverend Philip Dunn of Valley Christian Assembly lost his eyesight due to macular degeneration. The reverend was told he wouldn't see the effects possibly for several years; however, he began seeing black dots within a few months, and before he knew it, he was completely blind. Well, in August of 2018, Dunn started experiencing a headache and severe pain in his left eye. He was told one of his cataracts had ruptured, which created the possibility of further damage to his optic nerve. Dunn now needed surgery to remove the dangerous cataract. They did the surgery, and guess what happened? He can see. So, they did the surgery in the other eye, and guess what happened? Reverend Dunn has his sight back. His daughter had a great quote: "The doctors did what they could. God did what they couldn't." June 02. This kind of stuff still happens (and that's not even the good one, I saved the good one for last)!

This one happened May 30 in Iraq. You're in no good condition to be a Christian in Iraq any more than you are to be a Christian in Iran. In Iraq, there was a man, a Yazidi, who recounts his harrowing story. He was targeted by ISIS for genocide, the Yazidis. They were raped, they were beaten, they were executed. ISIS didn't even want to imprison the Yazidis, they wanted to kill them – wipe them off the map. This gentleman was captured, and he was covered with a flammable liquid and set on fire three times – and he did not burn. Are you going to question the eyewitnesses who saw it themselves? Three times ISIS tried to set him on fire. Three times, no go. This stuff still happens today. Are we going to continue to be Thomases?

I mean, look, if we continue to be surprised at what God is willing and able to do, does that not reveal that we are skeptical about who He is, no differently than the Pharisees? Are we skeptical? Do you not believe that God can heal you? Deliver you from an alcohol or drug addiction, or a physical ailment? If you really do not believe that in the depths of your heart, then I would suggest you not even ask Him to. Because if you don't believe He can do it, He won't.

Remember the story when He came back to Nazareth? Again, He goes right to the synagogue, and He preaches, except His reception wasn't all that great. They saw Jesus, "Oh, that's just Joseph and Mary's kid. Who the heck is HE to be telling us what to do and how to think!" And they tossed Him out! And it says in the Bible there that He didn't do many miracles there. Why? Because of their lack of faith. It's not that He couldn't! Jesus is God, He could have done many miracles there. He chose not to because of the lack of faith. If we do not believe He can truly do a miracle, then don't ask Him. Because you are still on the longest journey from your head to your heart.

See, God, our God is a God of miracles. How do I know that? Well, I know that not because He freed this man from possession. Not because He healed Peter's mother-in-law. Not because He healed the man with leprosy, or the paralyzed man, or the man with the deformed hand. You know how I know our God is a God of miracles? Because He loves me. Even with all I know about me, which He knows too – He knows what I did in my youth; He knows what I did in the last decade; He knows what I did yesterday; and in spite of it all, He still loves me so much so that He was willing to die for me. I don't care what anybody says – that is a miracle. Ask yourself: Knowing what you know about yourself, do you think you are worth dying for? Could you stand before God and tell Him face to face, "Lord, my life is such that I believe your Son should die for me!" Could you?

Look, I don't care how many degrees I get (though I am done!) – there's still so much that I do not know. But I can say this: Today is Father's Day.



I do know this. With all my being, with all my heart, I know, as a father, I would not hesitate to take a bullet for any one of my sons. Without thinking about it, without a second moment, there's no question in my mind. And I do not know a father here who would not do the same for their sons or their daughters. That's a father's job – to provide for his family and protect them from harm. And that's what our Father does for us. He provides for us in abundance, and He protects us from eternal damnation through what Christ did on the cross, even though He knows everything about every single one of you. Not only what you've done, what you've said, what you've thought, but what you're going to do. He still loves you. Is that not a miracle? That knowing everything about us, He loves us that much? Do you still not believe in miracles? Do you still doubt? Are you still skeptical? Have you still not made the longest journey from your head to your heart?

As Jesus said to Thomas, I say to you, stop doubting and believe. God forgives you, regardless of what it is. If you repent and you ask Him, He will forgive you. You have His word on that. God loves you in spite of ourselves. Stop doubting and believe. You will live a life so much more joyous than one who's questioning. Finish the journey. When you do, or if you already have, then show Him how thankful you are by how you live your life.

It's amazing to me how many Christians you could ask this question: "So, Christ died for your life so that you could live with Him eternally in heaven, right?" and they say, "Yes!" and I want to follow it up with, "Would you please tell that to your face? Because you don't seem very happy about it! You don't seem very joyous about it! When you're not happy and joyous that God loves you that much, it makes me wonder, have you not made the journey yet?"

Are we talking a good game? Do we believe it in our hearts? Friends, our God is a God of miracles. I do not believe that here [head], I believe it here [heart]. And if you do too, I invite you to stand so that we can pray together and give God thanks for loving us beyond what we deserve.