

**“Give God a Chance – to Come into the Broken Places”**

**Mark 1:21-28**

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It was our first Sunday in the new church where I was going to be an intern, and only our third Sunday in Cleveland. We arrived to the church early for worship, and I introduced my family to the congregation – my husband Corbin, three year old Linnea and six week old Glennis, who at the time was sleeping peacefully. The service began, and we were warmly welcomed by the pastor, whom I had just met that week. I settled Linnea in with some crayons and a book to look at, and left Glennis peacefully sleeping beside me in her carseat.

About midway through the service, just about the time of the pastoral prayer, I think, Glennis woke up. And she didn't just wake up. She woke up screaming! I quickly took her out of her carseat and took her to the little restroom off the narthex and changed her diaper. Nope. Still screaming. I walked her around the back of the sanctuary – I had no idea where else I could go. I could feel everyone's eyes on us, everyone turning around to look. I could imagine what they were saying – “can't she keep that baby quiet? How are we supposed to worship with that baby making all that noise?” Finally an older woman stood up and came back. Great, I thought, she's going to show me to the door. “Don't you worry” she whispered, “This church needs more babies crying in it!”

More babies crying? I could hardly believe what I heard. But she was right, no one was angry with me or Glennis that day. Instead, we were welcomed, we were given a chance, God was given a chance to do God's work through our family in that church. And Glennis? Well, once her gastric reflux was treated, as you can see now, she turned into a pretty happy girl.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus has just begun his ministry. As Dr. Yoost preached about last week, he has called his first disciples, who have left everything and followed him. They head from the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized, and go to Capernaum, a small town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus goes into the synagogue in the town, where Jews would gather to listen to their teachers and study Scripture.

Can you imagine the scene? It might not be that different than what you have encountered here today. Neighbors visiting one another and saying hello. Children being shushed as the teaching begins. And then Jesus begins to speak. Right away, those who are listening notice there is something different about him, something that sets him apart from the other rabbis, the other teachers that have spoken before him. Is it in the words he says? The way he carries himself? The way he talks? Mark doesn't tell us anything about the content of Jesus' teaching, just that, before anything else happens, the ones who are listening are “astounded at his

teaching , because he taught as one having authority, and not as one of the scribes.” Jesus has something special to say, and he says it well.

Still, though, they aren't sure who Jesus is, or why, maybe, even, he has come to teach them, there in that synagogue in that small town on that Sabbath day. And then it happens. The one everyone was trying to ignore, the man who looked strange and who maybe even was talking to himself, the one everyone wished didn't show up that day – that man called Jesus who he was. He called loudly, and clearly, from the depths of his broken soul, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God”

What would you have done, if you had been there that day? Would you have ignored the man, or dismissed his proclamation as the ranting of a damaged spirit? Would you have been upset that he had interrupted the Teacher, angry that your peaceful Sabbath had been disturbed? Would you have gone back to the man and tried to help him, like Betty did for me and Glennis that day?

What do we do, when our lesson plans are messed up (need another word here) and we are confronted with an interruption? What do we do when our lives themselves don't proceed the way we want them to, the way that we have planned?

Our sermon series for this six week season between Epiphany and Lent, between the visit of the Wise Men to the manger and the start of forty days of preparation for Easter, is called “Give God a Chance” The man who was healed that day in the synagogue did give God a chance, and saw Jesus for who he was. I wonder about the other people there? The scripture said they were amazed, that they recognized his authority and that he was more than just another scribe. I wonder if any of them were moved that day to call Jesus the Son of God, and to not only be amazed by his teaching, but become one of his followers.

Giving God a chance, giving God authority, sometimes means changing the direction you thought you were going with your life. Giving God a chance might mean doing something completely different than you envisioned.

As most of you know, I began my adult life as an engineer and a scientist, not as a pastor. I grew up in the church, and as a dedicated member of the youth group in my high school years. Even in college, I would bring my friends back from my living group to my home church each Sunday, driving the 20 miles to return to the place I knew I felt God's spirit living and active.

But being a pastor wasn't really something I could envision myself doing. Being a pastor meant that I would have to stand up and proclaim the Gospel, and be a leader. I was pretty comfortable as a churchgoer, but a leader in the church? Like the people in the synagogue that day in Capernaum, I was content to listen and not to lead.

It wasn't until my life was turned upside down by grief and tragedy that I was able to hear God's call. It wasn't until my husband Corbin and I had lost two sons and three other pregnancies had ended too soon, that the voice of God was able to break into my life and lead me to apply to seminary.

I think, sometimes, it's easier to ignore the voice of God when we feel like our hearts aren't broken. It's easier to tell ourselves we're doing ok, we go to church every Sunday, we don't really need to do anything else, when our lives seem to be purring along pretty quietly, and there aren't any demons disturbing us.

Or at least, there aren't any demons we will allow to speak.

In her book *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, the author and Benedictine nun Joan Chittister puts forth the idea that all of us have been wounded. All of us have endured some sort of struggle in our lives. As she writes:

There is no one who has not known what it is to lose in the game of life, to feel defeat, to know humiliation, to be left standing naked and alone before the cold and staring eyes of a world that does not grieve for your grief. Everyone I know has driven back great waves of pain, weathered deep ruptures of life's innocent designs.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe we're actually all a lot more like the man who disturbed Jesus' teaching than we are like those who were sitting quietly and listening. Maybe the question isn't whether we have been wounded but rather what our response will be to our brokenness.

Will we give God a chance to come into our lives, or will we push God away? Will we allow God to change us, to alter the path we have set for ourselves, or will we stubbornly and relentlessly pursue the things we *think* will make us happy?

I was pretty sure that being an engineer was the right path for me, as a woman who was good at math and enjoyed making things work. It helped that my dad was an engineer too. I thought being a Christian could come second, that I could neatly separate my life into the time I spent at work and the time I spent at church, without anyone needing to know that I was a Christian. I didn't hide what I did after work, but I didn't really talk about it either. And it was fun for a while. It was fun to meet with all kinds of different people, and to use my knowledge of mathematics and hydraulics. It was fun to travel and do field work on rivers and streams.

But it wasn't who I was. It wasn't who God was calling me to be.

Now, as Erik told us a couple of weeks ago, my story isn't the story of Pastor Dianne, just as his isn't the story of the Reverend Erik, and Charlie's isn't the story of the Reverend Doctor Yoost. Answering my call for me meant going to seminary, and becoming a parish pastor. Answering your call, giving God a chance in your life, might mean something entirely different. It might mean not being afraid to post your daily prayer in your cubicle. It might mean sharing your faith with your co-worker. It might mean sticking up for those who have no voice, whether it's at your workplace or on the street or in the grocery store.

Part of that answering, though, I think, involves knowing that you don't have to be perfect to give God a chance. You don't have to have everything right in your life, and have your faith all figured out, to head on the path God is calling you toward. In fact, God works in and through our broken hearts, our broken lives, in ways we can't even imagine.

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen posits that only those hearts that have been broken are able to be in ministry with others. Only when we have experienced heartache and pain are we able to reach out to a world filled with brokenness. A Christian who does not share himself or herself with others, who hides his or her wounds, cannot offer the hospitality of Christ to the world. Nouwen says, "Making one's own wounds a source of healing...does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men (and women) share." We can share our pain and sorrows with each other because Christ also shared our pain and sorrows. And only when we share our brokenness with others can we truly be in ministry with them. If we imagine our heart as a vessel, it can hold only so much. A vase when filled with water is not able to take on any more. But a broken vessel is open, open to sharing what was inside with the outside, open to healing.

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<sup>1</sup> Chittister, Joan D. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003) 2.

When our hearts are broken open by the struggles we encounter, and when we share those struggles with others and even with God, we free ourselves from a pain that can fester and wound us even further. We clear our hearts and make a space for healing and even for joy.

Let me make clear that although God uses our brokenness and struggle, that God brings us back to God in those times when we are hurting and wounded, that God does not cause the grief and pain in our lives in order that we may be brought closer to God. God is constantly calling to us, constantly wanting the best for us, constantly holding on to us in the midst of lives buffeted by pain. I think the preacher and theologian William Sloane Coffin said this most clearly in his sermon, *Alex's Death*, written just days after the death of his 23 year old son in a tragic car accident. He preached:

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. Which is not to say that there are no nature-caused deaths — I can think of many right here in this parish in the five years I've been here — deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden, which for that reason raise unanswerable questions, and even the specter of a Cosmic Sadist — yes, even an Eternal Vivisector. But violent deaths, such as the one Alex died — to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, "You blew it, buddy. You blew it." The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.<sup>2</sup>

God walks beside us in the tragedies of our lives. God lifts us up and holds us when those tragedies threaten to tear us apart. And in those times of tragedy and loss, we sometimes can most clearly see God, in ways that we could not before.

There is a story of a rabbi who was explaining that when we read Scripture, the words are written on our hearts. A student asked, "Shouldn't the words be in our hearts so we can know them, and know God?" The rabbi replied, "Only God can put Scripture inside your hearts. But reading sacred words can put them on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."

Will you give God a chance? Will you open your heart to God and allow God to see you for who you are, broken, wounded, scarred? If you do, I know God will come into your broken heart and move you in ways you are not even able to imagine. I know God will come in, and God will change you. I know, because God changed me. And I will never be the same.

Thanks be to God, we have a God who comes to us when we are broken. Thanks be to God, we have a God who understands brokenness and is always ready to heal and to make whole. Thanks be to God, our God is not afraid of the broken places.

Will you pray with me? Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript\\_eulogy\\_print.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_eulogy_print.html)