

Mission Madness

The 6th Sunday after Epiphany sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers
presented Sunday, Feb 4th, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Mark 1:29-39

The Text For The Sermon: *"When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'"* — Mark 1: 37-39

Did you catch the reference that Isaiah made to grasshoppers? Well, I did; but then that's what I'm supposed to do – on your behalf. Grasshoppers have gotten a bad rap to my way of thinking. In Aesop's Fables they are the lazy, playful bugs that have nothing for the winter and must beg the industrious ant for food and shelter. This carries over in the movie *"A Bug's Life"* where the grasshoppers torment the ants like a street gang.

Humans generally have a negative view of the grasshopper as a pest that can eat us out of our spot on the food chain. I remember an Ontario summer when the grasshoppers were thicker than flies. I was thirteen and had been hired by a neighbouring farm family to work a field where milkweed had spread among the field of young corn. When I walked out into the pasture toward the cornfield, each step caused a ripple of life that surged nearly 10 feet away as the mobs of grasshoppers leapt out of my way.

I liked the grasshoppers. They had wings too, just like eagles. While they cannot soar like eagles, they can leap 20 times more than their own body length. For a human, such a feat would be a flying leap of 40 yards, which would make the Super Bowl really spectacular. If only we could land gracefully, like a grasshopper.

Grasshoppers are one of the most successful species on the planet, coming in 18,000 different varieties (who counts this stuff?) and a variety of colours. Apparently the brighter colours of grasshoppers warn birds that they are not good to eat, something I can attest to as well. Grasshoppers not only have wings, though they are much less endowed than eagles, they also have 5 eyes. Part of their adaptability and survival is their ability to see everything around them in a great panorama. If we only see the next blade of grass in front of us, we will not grow and thrive. As long as I remain down in the grass, content to only look in front of me, I quickly become weighed down by trivia- annoyed by the attitudes of other people, caught up in my own selfish struggles, wondering why the grass doesn't taste better or worried that I will run out of grass altogether.

When I read Isaiah, I hear him saying to us, "Look grasshopper...have you not seen, have you not heard? Look around at the big wide, wonderful world. Behind it all is your creator, who has the expansive power of life, a power that can make a small grasshopper soar like an eagle." In faith, it is the capacity to look at the vast expanse of the world with a sense of awe and wonder that lifts us to new heights. Seeing things with the eyes of amazement, seeing ourselves as being part of a majestic creation, gives our faith the "wind beneath our wings" to soar like eagles.

Sometimes, all we can do is barely manage to put one foot in front of the other, over and over and over again. Maybe that *is* the pinnacle; that the very best thing is simply to be able to walk, in faith and with strength because God accompanies us. See our world with grasshopper eyes and eagle wings, you get a holistic view. You see what needs to be done and do it. It's what Jesus did. With keen vision he began his mission, a mission imprinted in his every move, in his DNA – there is some kind of madness in him.

Werner Kelber wrote that Jesus in the Gospel of Mark has a clear vision and mission that borders on madness: "he came to announce the Kingdom of God and to initiate its arrival in opposition to the

forces which threaten to destroy human life.” Jesus’ healings and exorcisms, his defiance to Roman pomp, his challenge to religious elites, his temper in the temple, and even his execution all drove towards a single purpose: to oppose that which impedes the flourishing of human life. Was he mad? Mark’s narrative wastes no time getting to the heart of the action. Before the first chapter is up, Jesus has taught with authority, exorcized an unclean spirit, and healed a woman who was near death. It is no wonder then that everyone is searching for him. Life under Roman occupation is not conditioned to encourage the fullness of human life for foreigners, certainly not for Jews. News spread of the one who can help them catch their breath, who can reacquaint them with their humanity, one whom even the demons obey. And by way of offering a coda to this first stint of feverishly paced ministry, Jesus says simply: “this is what I came to do.”

Jesus’ program of healing and exorcism cannot be understood apart from the context that necessitated it. Roman rule was emotionally as well as practically destructive to people in Judea. As just one example of these tensions, under the procuratorship of Cumanus (48-52 CE), a Roman soldier, who was posted on the portico of the temple, made an obscene gesture and sound at the people below. The sight of a Roman soldier standing on top of the temple looking down at the courtyards below, may itself have been an upsetting imposition of Roman rule over a local religious site. However, after his disrespectful gesture, the crowd became so irate that they began throwing stones at the man. The crowd grew quickly and Cumanus, feeling anxious that the situation could escalate, called in his soldiers to restore order. A soldier offered an unorchestrated and likely unplanned obscenity and was met with the crowd’s immediate response. It is a good example of the “vast difference between [Rome’s] official policy of non-interference and religious intolerance and the actual irritations despite this policy.” To people on the ground it was clear: authentic Jewish religious life was impossible under Roman occupation. The fullness of human life was protected for Romans but not if you were a Jew.

Jesus’ mission was to overcome these realities. His healings are not just random acts of charity on the way to the cross, but are integral to the very point that his death and resurrection make: that God’s intention in this world is human well-being and life for all, even in the face of death. The Roman Empire did not execute Jesus because of a heresy against a Jewish orthodoxy: they executed him for disturbing the perverse peace of an imperial status quo. They executed him because he was messing with the backroom boys and their power structures.

This is what Jesus came to do. He came to heal the world, not only of its illness, but also of its unhealthy subjugation to empires. He came to exorcize the demonic lies that uphold oppressive systems. And this is a challenge to those of us who “proclaim the message” today. Does the teaching, healing, and spiritual care that we, The Church, offer to the world succeed in challenging the corrupt foundation of the evils that prevail in our midst? Does it say not only what the kingdom is, but also show what it is opposed to? That is what Jesus came to do. He said “I have come that you may have life – in abundance!” Do you think that he might have been mad? This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let all the people say “Amen!”