

Prayer: the Human Element

The Element of Invocation

See Mark 5:1-20

September 10, 2006

In the film *Jumanji* two children move into an old, abandoned house. After a few days they wander up to the attic where they find a stack of ancient-looking board games. They pull “Jumanji” off the pile of games and open the dusty, dreary box. Suddenly, as they move their pieces around the board, strange things start to happen. Gigantic mosquitoes descend on them; a herd of monkeys takes over the kitchen; a lion claws on the door, hunts them down and tries to kill them. Apparently, this isn’t just an innocent, boring kids’ game. They realize that they’ve unleashed something powerful; they’re going on a journey that they can’t control; they’re in for the time of their lives. They’ve opened a box and now they have no idea how to control it or close it.

In one sense, prayer is like playing Jumanji – not in the sense that it’s magic or that it’s a child’s game, but in the sense that when we pray, when we open our hearts to the Risen and Exalted Christ, we’ve opened our hearts to the most powerful force in the universe. We could put it this way: If prayer came in a box, we’d have to slap a label on it in big, bold, bright letters: ***Warning! Open with care! The contents of this box may be highly explosive, unpredictable, wild and life-threatening! Be careful how you pray. And be very careful who you call upon.*** *Jesus is fond of big missions, big adventures.*

Last Sunday I said that sometimes prayer means crying out to God from our need and even desperation. This Sunday I want to look at prayer as invocation or calling on the Person of Jesus to be with us. The oldest liturgical prayer¹ we know about is the prayer of invocation taken from the New Testament (see Revelation 22:20b²) in which they simply called upon the Name of Jesus by saying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” It was probably spoken joyfully as they gathered for the Lord’s Supper. **Come, Lord Jesus!**

Invocation: Finding the New Center in Jesus

For the Christian the essence of prayer is being with Jesus (see Mark 3:13). Sometimes being with Jesus is sweet and fun and comforting. But as we’ll see in this story, sometimes prayer – being with Jesus – is like getting strapped in – against your will - and sent on the ride of your life. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus is never presented as our celestial cruise director whose one goal is to keep our lives safe and smooth. To the contrary, throughout this Gospel, Jesus constantly asked his followers to take scary steps of faith, by going to scary places and loving scary people. For the religious people of Jesus’ day, the safest and most respectable place was the temple in Jerusalem. The

¹ a prayer used for public worship

² It also appears in Corinthians 16 and the *Didache*, a Christian document dated shortly after the New Testament was written, around 100 years after Jesus was born.

Temple was “the center.” It was the place where you met God. It was the place to do your best praying. But Jesus says something astounding in the New Testament: through his life and death and resurrection, He is greater than the temple. He is the fulfillment of all that the temple hoped for and longed for. When Jesus died on the cross, he became the new meeting place between God and the human race. When we accept and trust and rest in what he has done for us, we have a new relationship with God. Now the only safe place, the center for our lives, is found in Jesus.

So because he is the new center, Jesus kept moving the disciples from the old center (i.e. the temple) where everything was safe and familiar and comfortable, to the margins where everything felt unsafe, scary and uncomfortable. For instance, in Mark 6:45 it says that Jesus “*made* his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida.” If they were anything like us, they probably whined incessantly. “We don’t want to get into the boat. It’s late and we’re tired. It’s dark and it’s scary. It’s probably going to rain and you’re leaving us alone.” To which Jesus says (more or less), “Stop whining and get in the boat: you’re going!” Jesus keeps going to the edges and he brings the disciples along with him. In Mark chapter 1 Jesus is on the edge with a leper. In Mark 2 he’s on the edge with sinners, so much so that the religious teachers complain, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:17). One of our common misconceptions is that through prayer God makes our lives smooth. Invocation, calling on the name of Jesus, greases the skids in our favor. That’s an illusion because prayer always invokes the name of Jesus, the boundary-pusher, the margin-dweller, the fierce and wild lover of our souls and other lost souls who keeps pushing us out of bounds.

Invocation: Meeting Jesus in Scary Places

Notice Mark 5:1 - “They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasene.” This certainly wasn’t a Christian theme park or a nice, neat, clean Christian subdivision; this was Gentile territory; the place of chaos, disintegration, brokenness, hate and demonic oppression. This is a dangerous and scary place. Jesus will lead his disciples right into this scary place where they’ll meet a scary man, surrounded by people employed in unclean occupations all in unclean Gentile territory.

It’s obvious that the guy in this story is not a “safe person.” He’s a terror to himself and to others around him. The Greek text emphasizes his inner and outer chaos with three negatives: “not even by chains could anyone any longer restrain him.” In verse 4 the word for subdue him (“No one was strong enough to subdue him”) was used for the taming of a wild animal. This guy is untamable. So night and day (verse 5) he wanders the tombs crying out and cutting himself with stones. My wife Julie works with people who are in so much pain that they cut themselves. When I asked Julie to explain this to me she said that sometimes people feel so much pain on inside but no one is able or willing to listen, so they cut themselves in order to manage the internal pain. It makes it feel real. Psychologists even refer to cutting as “the voice of the skin.” The skin can tell the story of my pain. Obviously, this guy is in pain – and no knows what to do with him.

I've encountered people I didn't know what to do with. Four years ago a young man named Jeff came into my pastor's study asking me how he could start his life over again. I didn't like Jeff at first. With long, greasy hair, arms covered with tattoos, and hauntingly sad and lonely eyes, I pegged Jeff as a con artist. But after years in the ministry, I can usually spot a con, and Jeff wasn't a con. He never asked for cash or food. He was driven by deeper hungers – staying out of jail, finding sobriety and serenity, and experiencing some kind of spiritual awakening. Like the prodigal son, Jeff was weary of eating pig slop and now he yearned for the father's embrace.

I never even considered inviting him to a worship service. Jeff was just too different – too ragged, too messy, too tattooed. He'd never fit with us. We have nice worship services and lots of other “services” for nice families. In our world, everything is pretty tidy, and therefore our world doesn't intersect with Jeff's world. Ragged people like Jeff don't belong in our “Christian world.”

Jesus knows exactly what to do with the crazed demoniac: he sees a human being underneath. And so Jesus calmly tells the mob of demons, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!” This short sentence reveals the love of Jesus. Do you remember Genesis 1:26-27? That's exactly what Jesus sees in this rage-filled, dangerous man. It also reveals the authority of Jesus. We have actual records on Greek papyri that describe long and convoluted pagan exorcisms. Formulas, spells, incantations, catchwords – anything was used to try to get the advantage over the unclean spirits. But here with Jesus it's all so calm and authoritative. He just says, “Get lost.” Jesus is clearly in charge here. When he leads us to strange places and strange people, when he guides us to walk right into our fears, He knows what he's doing.

Invocation Always Means Surprises

At this point the story takes a strange twist. And by the way, when you invite Jesus to come into your life, always get ready for some strange twists to your life. Jesus gives them permission to enter a herd of pigs “and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.” Let's be honest: this is a tough passage. Jesus is pushing things here. I'd like to ask Jesus, “Did you really have to waste an entire herd of 2,000 pigs? Think of all the amazing roasted pig on a spit outreaches we could have at Three Village Church!” Some commentators speculate that these pig-tenders were actually Jewish farmers who were compromising their faith (pigs are non-kosher, unclean animals) and then they were colluding with the Roman oppressors by selling their bacon and chops. This is conjecture, but even if it's true, is this fair? Jesus doesn't explain or justify his actions. He saves one life – a crazy outcast – and lets 2,000 pigs plummet to their death. And he never apologizes. Everyone else is worried about the pigs; Jesus seemed to focus on one bleeding, messy, marginal human being.

Of course not everyone sees it that way. (See verses 14-16). Notice verse 15 – “When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind...” Let me stop there. They've just seen a

miracle. A broken man has been restored. A human being has met Jesus. Remember verses 4 and 5? Now, by contrast, look at this guy! He's sitting there, dressed and in his right mind." The calm at the center of this story reminds us of the previous story in chapter 4 when the calm of Jesus descended on the lake – "then the wind died down and it was completely still" (Mark 4:39). At this point I would expect the storyteller to say, "And the people praised God." Or "and they marveled at the power of Jesus." Or "and they went with Jesus to find more broken people." But instead it says, "and they were afraid." That's understandable. Invoking the name of Jesus isn't always safe and comfortable. We should be afraid. Obviously, not all fear is good. You shouldn't have to be afraid that your father or your husband will hit you or sexually abuse you. You shouldn't have to be afraid that no one will ever love you. God does not want you to live with that kind of fear. But the right amount of fear experienced in the right way can be healthy and good for our faith. Jesus isn't just into safety. He's into life – and sometimes the best things in life are scary. So never shirk off something because of fear. Jesus might say, "Move into your fear. All of the good stuff in life is scary."

Invocation: Allowing Jesus to Throw Things off Balance

But then it's what happens next that is really shocking. So they're afraid but then verse 16 says "Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man..." and then the Gospel storyteller Mark adds this detail "and told about the pigs as well." Yea, those pigs were worth a lot of money. Hey, those were nice pigs. So what in the world are they going to do with Jesus? As a character keeps mumbling in one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, "Jesus has thrown everything off balance." "He's thrown everything off balance and he shouldn't have done that." In other words, if it ain't broken Jesus, don't fix it. In this story, it wasn't broken. Sure, we got this crazy guy living in the cemetery. Sure, he howls a little loud sometimes. Sure, he cuts himself with stones. Sure, we've tried to put him in chains a hundred times and he keeps breaking the chains. But all in all, everything is in balance. The crazy guy stays in the tombs. We hang out with our friends, watch our pigs and make a killing off the bacon and chops. It's weird and wrong but it's also safe and predictable. Everyone has their place. But then Jesus comes and he upsets the balance. He throws everything off.

Of course, he's merely throwing things back to the way they should be. God didn't create this man in his image to live as a crazed, uncontrollable demoniac. That's out of balance. So Jesus comes to rebalance the world (see Colossians 3:9). Of course the rebalancing does not come without a cost. Pigs drown and a Satan worshipper shows up for church.

What does this have to do with prayer? We blithely say things like "Prayer changes things." We crochet it on pillows and calligraphy it and hang it on our walls. So then we pray. We invoke the name of Jesus; we open the nice little "prayer box" and what happens? Jesus actually shows up. Jesus actually starts changing things. And we're tempted to say, "Hey, Jesus, get back in the box. I wanted you to change my cash-flow problem but not my sex life. I wanted you to get me a tax break, but I didn't want to get involved with justice for people trapped in grinding poverty and forced prostitution. I

wanted spiritual blessings but I didn't want you to call me to give those blessings away so that I could be filled up again."

Look at what happened in verse 17 – "then the people in that region began to plead with Jesus to leave their region." This is amazing! Jesus shows up and he just starts doing what Jesus does – i.e. he takes broken lives and a broken world and he begins to restore it, transform it, change it, make it whole – but pigs die and money gets lost and things get scary and strange people start showing up and it's all too weird and they can't handle it so they just ask him to leave. And notice they don't ask politely – they plead with Jesus to leave, "Please, o pretty please, would you just get out of here and leave us alone so we can get back to business as usual?"

Imagine asking Jesus to leave! Now lest you think that this is really bizarre, let's look at the next chapter in Mark (see 6:1-6). Jesus comes to his hometown, a good Jewish town, and it's the Sabbath. People are worshipping; they are praying. And once again, Jesus stands up to do what Jesus does: he teaches. But He's not just giving information or tickling their intellect; he's calling for life change; he's setting the world right-side up; he's rebalancing a world out of whack; he's restoring broken lives and a broken cosmos. And notice how the people respond? See verses 2-3. "And they took offense at him." The Greek word for offense is the word *skandalon* from which we get our word scandal. They are scandalized by Jesus. It means to be put off or repelled or at the very least made uncomfortable. This Greek word occurs eight times in the Gospel of Mark to refer to Jesus.

I've been following and trusting Jesus for over thirty years but there are days when I love him – utterly and passionately – but I don't understand him. I am put off. I'm challenged and stretched. I'm scandalized by Jesus. I would say that we are no longer astonished, amazed, shocked, stretched, bewildered, fearful and scandalized by Jesus, our faith has begun to atrophy. Yes, be scandalized. Let's allow our prayer life to re-scandalize our hearts.

And then the story concludes with verses 5 and 6 – "He could do no miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them." Apparently Jesus was capable of much more than they could ever imagine. And then verse 6 says this about Jesus: "And he was amazed at their lack of faith." He was amazed at their lack of faith! This verse just astounds me and moves me and challenges me. Does Jesus look at me and say to the angels, "You know, his lack of faith astounds me. I love him. I'm ready to do great things through him. But he never asks. Or if he does ask, they're always such puny, self-centered prayers. I'm just waiting for the day when he'll ask me for something big, something grand, something that changes the world. But right now I'm just a little stunned and perplexed why he doesn't do that."

People of God: let's ask. Let's dream big dreams because we have a big Savior. He died to set us free. The cross of Jesus opens a door whereby we can enter the presence of a holy God, a God whom the Bible calls a "consuming fire." We don't just waltz into the presence of this holy God. But Jesus has taken our place, he died for our sins, he opened

the door by shedding his blood and now we can come into God's presence clothed in his righteousness crying out, "Abba, Father!" So let's come and ask boldly, grandly, confidently. Let's ask with vision and courage and freedom – not just for ourselves and our needs but for the glory of His name and for the good of this world as well.

When employees used to join the workforce at Apple Computer their leader Steve Jobs would say, "Let's make a dent in the universe." The former chairman of General Electric, Jack Welch, used to say that no one in his company would ever get in trouble for "swinging for the fences and missing." Instead, according to Welch, "The mortal sin was spending two years on a project which, even if it worked, wouldn't make the earth wobble a bit on its axis." I read those words in Midway airport and I shuddered. I wanted to kneel right there and cry out, "God, if that's true for Jack Welch, may it be true for us."

My brothers and sisters, we are children of God. Christ redeemed us. The image of God is being restored in us. You may say, "Ugh, I have so far to go. I'm not there yet and there's so much gunk in my life." Yes, but God is your Father. Christ is your Savior and your elder brother. The Spirit of God has been poured out on you. May our great God never say, "I'm amazed by their lack of faith!" After all, listen to his promise: Call to me (that's invoking the name of God) and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things that you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3). And then God promises, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us..."

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, "We delude ourselves into thinking that to refrain from venturing is modesty, and that it must please God as humility. No, no! Not to venture means to make a fool of God – because all he is waiting for is that you go forth." Prayer, invoking the presence of Jesus, is all about venturing out with God.

Some people lament the fact that we are now in what's called a "post-Christian world." It's scary out there. We're tempted to crawl back into our safe places. And God says, "Let your light shine. It's never been a better day to let your light shine. Candles shine in dark places." Call on the Name of Jesus. He's really there. He's really available. What are you waiting for?