

Servants

Mark 1:29-31

February 8, 2009

*You call us into your church,
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world ...*

To proclaim the gospel to all the world ...

Let me tell you a story. This story begins where all stories begin ... at the beginning. At the very beginning.

At the very beginning, the universe was formless and empty and dark. There was nothing at all. Nothing, except God. Because God simply is. There was nothing, but then God spoke, and when God spoke, things started to happen. The emptiness started to be filled, and in the formlessness things started to take shape, and light illuminated the darkness. The light came from huge masses of hot gas -- hydrogen and helium -- formed into orbs, into huge spheres some much larger and much hotter than our sun, scattered over an area that is utterly beyond our imagination. It was a universe expanding in every direction far beyond understanding, and every direction filled with these hot, burning masses, with these stars.

And there were other bodies, too. Other bodies that were cooler, cool enough that they solidified -- asteroids and moons and planets. And there was one that was covered with water. And it was not too hot and not too cool, so that living things could survive there. And God put living things on that planet, this planet. All kinds of things! Centipedes and mosquitoes and beetles and cougars and hagfish and lions and tigers and bears. Oh, my!

Oh, my is right, because it was beautiful. It was so rich with such a diversity of living things: plants and animals and some things we're not sure which! Some things we know, and lots of things we don't know. Extraordinary complexity, but also extraordinary beauty.

All of it God made, and for what? Well, it's hard for us to try to decipher God's mind, but it seemed to be made only to bring God delight. Because God could do it, he did it! To bring delight. Or to bring delight to itself. He wanted the earth itself and living things to take delight in being alive, in doing what you do by being alive.

And it was beautiful. And it was rich. And it was glorious. And it reflected the glory of the one who made it.

And one living being, one creature, God set apart from the rest. Very much like all the rest, made up of the same kind of stuff as all the rest, but somehow different. God said, "This one will be like me." Imagine that! Like God!

And how? We don't know exactly how, but this creature had a special kind of power. Not just to be, but also to influence things. And this creature had a special kind of responsibility. Not just to eat and sleep and reproduce, but somehow to take care of things, to take care of all the things, and to take care of itself. This creature had a special capacity for relationships. Not just to be, but to love. And to create things, and to make new forms and kinds of things. In that way, too, this creature was like God.

This creature had a special mandate to use that power and use that responsibility and use that creativity to make what was beautiful even more beautiful, to make what was glorious even more glorious. But this creature took the freedom it had, the power it had, and misused it. And got lost and abused it. Somehow, with all that it was given, it wasn't satisfied with what it had. It wanted more. If it saw someone else that it suspected of having advantages it didn't have, it wanted what it had, it wanted everything for itself.

It even wanted what God had. It wasn't satisfied with simply being like God, but wanted to be its own God. It wanted to do what it wanted to do. And what was beautiful began to be despoiled. And what was full of life and glorious began to be marred. And death became part of existence. And what had been brought together started to fall apart.

And God, as you can imagine, was disturbed. Can we say that God was heartbroken? But God gave them a new gift. God gave these creatures, these people, the gift of law. A wonderful law, not law to bind in and hem in, but law that would set them free. Law that wasn't just about this thing or that thing, but somehow about all things, encompassing religious observances and social

observances and family observances and international relations. A law that showed them a way, a way to be alive and to bring life.

It was a wonderful gift. A gift to the people to have and to know so that they could restore what God had intended for all that was here. But the people didn't learn the law, or they ignored it. Or they rejected it and still wanted to do things their own way and didn't follow the law and had nothing to do with it.

So God gave them another gift. God gave them prophets. Men and women would come and remind them. Remind might be a rather soft word. They would come and scold them. Even scold is a soft word. The prophets came and preached the word of God, and warned them, "If you do not follow the law, you will die!"

But the people ignored the prophets. They didn't want to listen to the prophets! They wanted people who would tell them everything they wanted to hear. They didn't want to listen to the prophets, so they pushed them aside, they ignored them, and sometimes they even killed them.

Then God sent them another prophet. This prophet was different from the rest. God sent them a teacher. But this was more than a teacher! This was called ... a son. The Son of God! Extraordinary! One who was like us, whom we would recognize, would seem like one of us, but yet, somehow, carried in himself who God was, what God wanted. This one came to us and told us things and showed us things. Showed us a way. Showed us the way!

His words healed broken spirits. He forgave unimaginable sins. Just with the words of his voice. And his touch healed broken bodies. And he brought that message of hope that God is not coming to wipe you out. God is not coming to judge you. God wants to save you and lift you up, to restore the beauty and glory and goodness for which you were intended. And this one, this Jesus, brought a way to make that possible.

But the people ignored him. They didn't want to listen to him. They liked doing things the way they were doing them. They thought he was a threat to their structures, to the powers that be, to their ways of doing things. So they rejected him too. And they killed him.

But wonder! Wonder!

He is alive! God raised him to life. Death did not defeat him. Evil did not overcome him. In him we see that the power of life, the power of love, the power of goodness is stronger! God is stronger than death! God's love is stronger than hatred! Hope will not be squashed! It will survive!

And we have a chance to become part of that! We can join ourselves to him, and in joining ourselves to him, that hope is restored. We look forward to a world that will be as God intends, full of the glory and beauty and goodness that God intends! And not just then, but even now. We know that even now, we are not separated from God, but brought together as we put ourselves in this One, in Jesus. Hope lives.

That's my story. That's the good news. That's the gospel. Go tell it!

But we don't. We don't, do we? Why not? Why don't we tell the story?

Maybe you don't tell it because you don't know it. Or you don't think you know it well enough. Well, let me tell you, there is a remedy to that! You can know it.

But you do! You do know the story! You know enough of it to tell it! I think of that man in the story that we read from the Gospel of Mark. What did he know about Jesus? He had an awful skin disease. He came to Jesus, and said "If you want to, Jesus, you can make me well." And Jesus did. And Jesus told him to be quiet. And what did he do? He went and told everyone he knew about it. He didn't know a lot about Jesus, but he knew enough. He knew enough to tell. Because he had experienced that good news.

Or maybe you don't tell it because you don't have the courage. You think, "What if someone asks me a question I can't answer?" Or "What if someone isn't interested in what I have to say?" Or "What if they think I'm silly for wanting to talk about it in the first place?"

So? It's not about you! It's not your story! And the one whose story it is, will give you the courage and strength enough to tell it. We're only responsible for telling what we know, and we know enough. We have courage enough to be able to share what we know.

Or maybe you don't tell it because you think it "unseemly," because, somehow, it isn't your right to try to push yourself on someone else, to try to tell them what they should believe, or to try to convince them of seeing things in a certain way. And you're put off by all those caricatures of the evangelists that seem more about "putting another notch in their belts" or counting profits or measuring results.

But let me make something very clear to you! We are never asked to try to convince somebody of something else or tell them what to believe. We are never asked to persuade somebody else or to change their minds. We are not asked to make converts.

You call us into your church to proclaim the gospel ...

We are called to tell it, not to sell it. And there's a big difference! We are not salespeople whose success is won when the person purchases what we're offering, when we've made the sale, made the convert. We've done our job when we tell the story. And why would you want to tell it ...?

Or maybe you don't tell it because you don't believe it. And it is true, that if you don't believe the story, there is no good reason to tell it. But if you do believe the story, if you hear it and it rings so true to you ... if you look at the world and feel: "No, it isn't just a scattering of random chances, but somehow, this is brought together, not just by mind, but by some kind of loving design" ... if you sense that somehow the way we relate to each other has to have some root of something real and substantial ... if you hear the words of grace and say, "It is too good of a story not to be true" ... if you believe that at the heart of the universe is love, that God, as opposed to being an austere judge, is a loving welcomer of all of us ... if you believe the story, then what reason is there not to tell it?

Maybe, before we can proclaim the gospel to all the world, the good news has to be proclaimed to us once more.

Let me tell you a story ...