

**July 18, 2021**

The gospel of Mark has a frantic pace. Everything is happening, and happening fast. He uses words like “immediately”, and “hurried”, and “rushed”, and “at once.”

From our reading today you get the feeling that, things are hectic and out of control. Jesus is at the center of enormous human attention and need.

Our gospel reading is also a little chopped up... We skip from verse 34 to verse 53. Pretty much skipping the feeding the five thousand and Jesus walking on water... Typically, when our reading skips a little, it's not so much about omitting things as much as it's about focusing our attention.

And today our attention is focused on the people's response to Jesus. Where ever he goes, whatever he does, people are responding to him in droves. People, everywhere are clamoring to see Jesus, to be close to him...

The metaphor that Jesus uses to describe the people is that “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep without a Shepherd... Sheep are good metaphors for people. Sheep are vulnerable, defenseless, anxious and not that bright!

During the time of Jesus, the people were vulnerable, defenseless and certainly anxious! There was a lot that was out of their control!

The nation of Israel was a vassal of Rome. That means they were under roman occupation... Taxes were imposed and paid to King Herod, who in turn paid homage to Rome... Roman soldiers were present, and did the bidding of the

empire... They were often ruthless and threatening... The Jewish people hated and resented them.

The religious leaders were also under the Roman thumb, they walked a fine line between maintaining cultural integrity and sliding into cultural chaos. The religious people were between a rock and a hard place. They knew the consequences of standing up to Rome, and yet, at the same time, they knew their scriptures, they knew the blasphemy of saying things like Caesar is Lord...

And exactly because of all this pressure and tension, religiously, the Pharisees and Sadducees were turning on each other... They were debating the meaning of eternal life and resurrection and what constituted being ethnically Jewish.

And in the midst of all this, the people of Israel were holding onto a messianic expectation that God would send a messiah, an anointed one to save them.

Some were expecting a warrior king, like a new King David, who would raise armies and fight the Romans and get rid of them once and for all. Some were expecting a spiritual messiah, like a Moses who would lead them out of bondage to Rome.

So, in this context, in this powder-keg, and with all these raised expectations, Jesus comes on the scene. He is a masterful teacher, he has compassion and heals everyone, and everybody was clamoring to see him...

Quick story... I really cherished my time down in Austin Minnesota. A big company town, lots of meat packing jobs. A lot of different ethnic groups! In the public schools, there were over 50 different languages represented!

One Sunday I was leading worship and noticed a group of Africans worshipping with us. Believe me, it was noticeable! I had also met one of them the week before, at a Pastor's conference meeting. His name was Wal.

After worship ended, I stood in the usual place shaking hands, when I noticed the group exiting out a side door. So, I immediately left my place and chased them down on the sidewalk. Wal, who is very tall, seemed to be the spokesman... He said, "Todd, we'll come meet you tomorrow morning." I thought, well, alright!

So, the next day came and Wal and all his buddies showed up promptly at 9. They were all wearing suits and ties and I had to scramble to find enough chairs for everyone to sit! A couple of them were from Austin, a couple from Mankato, a couple from Rochester... They were from different places, but they were one in spirit!

And they didn't waste any time... Wal said that there was a group of Nuer, their tribe, who wanted to worship together in Austin and they needed a space. Would we be willing to let them worship in our church?

I yammered something about needing to get permission from the council, which they interpreted to mean "yes." And then suddenly we were in the middle of a prayer meeting, led by Wal, and I had no idea what they were saying, but it was obvious when it was my turn to pray and say something, and so I did... And that was the start of my friendship with Wal! And with Simon, and with Galuac, and with Solomon...

They taught me a lot. I'm so grateful to them. One of the things they taught me, was how to see Jesus differently. Maybe I take too many things for granted, or maybe I'm just too comfortable, I don't know... But my Sudanese friends

clamored to know Jesus... All of them knew what it was like to live in a refugee camp. All of them still had parents and brothers and sisters living in refugee camps.

There was a hunger there that I'll not forget. In fact, Wal went back to South Sudan, he's there now and ministering to people in the Gambelia refugee camp!

And frankly, when you think about it, all of us know what that hunger is about. You see, all of us have been in situations when we are on our knees and in prayer. Clamoring for healing, clamoring for wholeness, searching for meaning and understanding...

And the good news today, is that Jesus has compassion for all of us! In whatever situation we find ourselves in, Jesus is just a prayer away. And we might not even know what we're praying for or why, but healing and wholeness comes...

The presence of Christ, makes all the difference in the world. As it was for those people in Galilee, and so also it is for us... Amen...