

Church, Interrupted

Mark 1:21-28

I know a preacher who, on his very first Sunday at a church in a small southern town, made it to the end of his very first sermon in his new parish, and then asked the congregation to stand for the last hymn. As was their custom he said, "Now during the singing of the last hymn, if there are those who would unite with our church, or those who, in response to the sermon would simply like to come forward and kneel in prayer for a time at the altar, please feel free to come during the hymn."

The hymn was hardly begun when a young man shouted out loud, ran down the center aisle, leapt over the altar rail, and threw himself bodily upon the altar with shrieks and screams. The new preacher just stood there stunned.

A couple of ushers came forward and helped the weeping, screaming young man out a side door. Evidently, this had happened before. I don't think that preacher ever quite recovered from that episode, nor was he helped by his fellow pastors who said things like, "Now that must have been some sermon!"

Mental illness and confusion are no laughing matter. Some of you know firsthand the hell of the tormented mind, in yourself, or in someone you love. Where does one go in such torment?

Jesus, newest preacher in town, had just finished his very first sermon. As the hymn was being sung, a raving man stood in the middle of church shouting vague threats at the young preacher.

"I kno-o-o-w who you are," howled something deep within the man. "You're the Ho-o-o-ly One of God."

"Shutup," said Jesus. "Come out of him!" Things were getting odd that Sabbath in Capernaum. The man fell to the floor, his arms beating wildly at the air, his legs thrashing out so that people moved back to give him a wide circle, froths of foam and strange cries coming out of his mouth. Then the man became strangely calm and lay very still. Slowly he picked himself up off the floor, his face now tranquil, his eyes clear, his voice calm and composed.

In church, of all places. Church is one of the most planned, ordered, quiet and controlled times of our week. We gather. We sit quietly, fixed in rows of pews. Everything is measured and moderated. On those rare occasions when there is some intrusion into this ordered solemnity—someone slumps forward in the pew with some health problem, somebody in shabby dress stumbles in off the street, a child wakes and begins to scream—we are shaken by the intrusion. In church of all places.

At Duke Divinity School a worship professor told his class, 'You need to picture yourself in the middle of some outburst, some unfortunate intrusion into the Sunday service. How will you react? Think about calling an ambulance. Keep your eyes upon the ushers should you need assistance.'

Despite the best efforts of ministers and musicians, glitches, disturbances, unfortunate interruptions will occur. And in church, of all places. It even happened to Jesus.

Church can be so ordered, so graceful, beautiful, serene, and still. Church, so ordered, is the world as we would like it to be, not just on Sundays at eleven, but every day, all day. But this world is not that way. This world, for all its beauty and grace, is also the realm of the brokenhearted. Things do not go well for millions among us. That troubled man, screaming at Jesus, full of demonic turmoil, let him be for us a metaphor, a symbol of all that chaotic, confusion that, despite our best efforts, bubbles up, surges forth, intrudes. Even in church, of all places.

I recall a haunting story of a young boy's encounter with the dark reality of the hurt that awaited him in life. Par Lagerkvist's short story, 'My Father and I,' tells of an experience he had as a small boy when he and his father went out for a walk one Sunday afternoon. It was a beautiful day when their walk began, but suddenly night came, and they were engulfed in darkness. To find their way home, they followed the familiar railroad tracks. The boy was filled with great fear at the encroaching darkness, though the father walked calmly along.

The boy tried to walk closer to his father. He confesses to his father that the darkness is terrifying him and the father replies:

"No, my boy, it's not horrible," he said, taking me by the hand. "Yes, father, it is." "No, my child, you mustn't think that. Not when we know there is a God."

I felt so lonely, forsaken. It was so strange that only I was afraid, not father, that we didn't think the same. And strange that what he had said didn't help me and stop me from being afraid. Not even what he said about God helped me. ...

I sensed what he meant: it was the anguish that was to come, the unknown, all that father knew nothing about, that he wouldn't be able to protect me against. That was how this world, this life, would be for me; not like father's where everything was secure and certain.

On this bright, crisp Sunday, this Forth Sunday of Epiphany, season of light, what of that darkness when it intrudes into your life? What is the answer? What does Jesus do with that darkness ahead?

Jesus intrudes, enters the hurt, the "darkness ahead," and rebukes it, commands it to depart, stills troubled spirits and blesses those in torment. Jesus is the Holy One of God come among us, entering the pain, confronting the evil, taking charge, healing the broken heart.

Amen.