

“The Gift of Clarity”<sup>1</sup>

I.

It’s not the most promising way to start a sermon, but here it is: I don’t want your pity. I really don’t. But I do hope you appreciate the delicate situation in which I find myself this morning. You might say I drew the short straw. Since last Sunday’s service featured a guest preacher, I am the first minister on the staff to stand in this pulpit since the passage of what you might call a historic budget. For the first time in anyone’s memory, this congregation has adopted an annual budget that calls for an overall *reduction* in spending –something like 6 and a half percent from what was budgeted for the previous year.

There are only a couple of ways to cut that kind of money out of a church budget: you have to reduce staff, and you have to decrease mission. So we are doing both of those things, at all levels. On the staff side, the proposed Minister of Care and Welcome position will not be filled this year. (Of course, we hope to fill it eventually). Through some shuffling of responsibilities, and by leaving some positions open, support and custodial staff positions have been similarly reduced. And, on the mission side, this year Plymouth will decrease the amount of money it gives to Our Church’s Wider Mission - the work of the United Church of Christ beyond the local congregation.

These are not easy decisions, but they have not been made lightly. For months now, I have watched my colleagues—especially Jennifer Hines and David Ruhe—wrestle with these questions. And with their help, I believe the Personnel Committee, the Trustees and the Church Council have carefully and faithfully crafted a budget for a time such as this.

Now we figure out how to live with it. The new budget raises a lot of questions, and those questions do not admit of easy answers. How will we do the work of this church with fewer people on the payroll? How do we marshal our resources in order to reach out to those who are hurting more than we are? How can we survive, and perhaps even thrive, in this season of layoffs and furloughs and loss?

I know that we can not settle these questions this morning—especially if I am the one doing all of the talking—but maybe we can start to think about them together. And maybe the Gospel of Mark can help us do that. It seems to me that this morning’s scripture passage may point the way forward. When we read these words in a time such as this—when we reflect with the budget in one hand and the Bible in the other— things start to look a little different. Yes, this is a season of scarcity. But, for that very reason, it holds a whole lot of promise. Times like this offer us the rare and precious gift of clarity.

II.

Most biblical scholars will tell that you that the Gospel of Mark does not include a detailed account of the temptation of Jesus. But I am starting to suspect that those scholars are wrong. What we have before us this morning is a temptation story –a tale about a time in the early ministry of Jesus when he could have strayed from his path.<sup>2</sup> It is an intricate little story, unfolding in three scenes.

First Scene: A Private Healing. On the Sabbath day, just after the service in the synagogue in the city of Capernaum, Jesus and the disciples retire to the home of Simon

or, as he is more commonly called, Peter. This story offers a fascinating glimpse into the domestic life of Peter. Have you ever wondered why he would be so quick to leave everything behind and wander the countryside with Jesus? Did you notice, in the reading, that he apparently lives with his mother-in-law? But she is not a burden or an annoyance or a punch line to Peter. He clearly cares for her and wants her to be well. She is sick with a fever and the disciples quickly tell Jesus about her. So Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up; her fever flees her and she begins to serve them –not because a woman’s place is in the kitchen, but because her service signifies the depth and the fullness of her healing. Jesus restores her completely to the life she used to live.

Second Scene: The Crowd Closes In. Word starts to spread about the power of Jesus to heal and make whole. At sundown—when the Sabbath officially ends<sup>3</sup>—the people of Capernaum come in droves to Peter’s porch: “*The whole city was gathered around the door.*” The sick and tormented and demon-possessed clamor for Jesus’ touch. He heals and makes whole all who find their way to him.

Third and Final Scene: Jesus Slips Free. Early the next morning, long before sunrise, Jesus goes out in search of some alone time. He finds a deserted place to pray. But his solitude proves short-lived. In an inspired bit of translation, the New Revised Standard Version tells us that Peter and his companions “*hunted*” for Jesus –they search high and low for him, eager to get the healer back in business, to respond to the deep and desperate need of the people. But Jesus shoots them down. “Let’s get out of here,” he says. “*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.*” And just like that, they leave town.

The curtain comes down. The story ends, but the work of Jesus goes on.

### III.

Is this a temptation story? Sure. We tend to think of temptation as the inclination to do bad things –to break a diet, or a vow; to lie or cheat or steal. But the Bible knows better than that. The greatest temptations are always temptations to do something *good* –to do a good thing that is not the right thing; to do a good thing that would distract us from better things; to do a good thing that would seduce us away from the calling and the purpose of God.

In this case, the good thing tempting Jesus is the work of exorcism and healing. Given the need in the city of Capernaum, and given his own ever-growing popularity, Jesus could have easily settled down and stayed put; bought a nice house with a cozy little office and hung out his shingle: “Jesus of Nazareth, Healer and Exorcist.” What a life that would have been. He could have done a whole lot of good for a whole lot of people. He could have been spared all of that wandering around. And who knows? Instead of going to a cross at the age of 33, he may have died in bed at a ripe old age, surrounded by great-grandchildren.

Did it ever cross his mind? Did he dare to mull it over, to dream of what might be? I think so. Why else would Jesus, in the third scene of our story, get up so early and go out to the middle of nowhere to pray? I think he was considering this very possibility; wrestling with this temptation. And in prayer, he finds the strength to say no; to reject something good for the sake of something better. “*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.*” In his wilderness wrestlings, in the dark night of prayer, Jesus receives the gift of clarity.

He knows who he is; he knows what he came to do. And he will not be distracted. Nothing will deter him from the work of proclaiming the nearness of the reign of God. Nothing will cause him to stray from the path prepared for him.<sup>4</sup>

#### IV.

Remember what we set out to do this morning? To reflect with the budget in one hand and the Bible in the other? In this season of scarcity—the year of the incredible shrinking budget—what is Jesus’ story saying to us? Maybe this is our time to wrestle with the same temptations; maybe now it is our turn to seek the gift of clarity.

It is a gift that often eludes us. In a large and active congregation like Plymouth Church, clarity can be hard to come by. It’s one of David’s favorite new expressions. He keeps reminding the staff that big churches can do anything they want, with excellence. But they can not do everything. We can not do everything. I think we as a congregation have been in some denial about this. So often at Plymouth we want to be all things to all people; to churn out programs, events and activities for every conceivable interest, for every possible need, real or imagined. We want to do it all and we want to do it well.

But that may be a luxury that we can no longer afford. Scarce resources call for difficult decisions. We will have to learn to recognize temptation; to realize that even a good thing can distract us from the main thing. We will have to learn to sometimes say, “No.”

And, by the way, when I say “we,” I mean “we.” This isn’t just an issue for the staff or for the leadership of this church to study and solve, to form a committee and issue a report. All of us are in this together. And this morning, there are two very specific things I would ask you to do: First of all, don’t be afraid to step up. A church with less staff is a church in need of more volunteers. If you see something that we should be doing, please, offer to do it. Let God use *your* gifts to enrich this church. Second, pray. Pray for the staff of this church, as we set priorities and shuffle responsibilities. Pray for the leaders of this church, those who serve on its boards and committees, that they may feel empowered and enabled to discern and to do the things that matter most. Pray that this congregation will make the most of this moment; will find a way to follow where God is leading us.

Of course, your church leaders have already begun to take on these tasks. From what I have seen so far, I have a lot of faith in them and in their ability to be open to what the Spirit is saying to the church. In the conversation before the Church Council adopted the budget, Donna Paulsen said something so wise, so insightful, that I immediately<sup>5</sup> wrote it down and saved it for this sermon. This is an opportunity, she said, to focus on our core mission and our core obligations. Donna is right. This is a time to love God, to love other people, and to let go of everything else.

If we can do that, this budget may prove to be a blessing; an opportunity for us to remember who we are and what we are here to do. As we work and pray and struggle together, may we be blessed with the good gift of clarity.

Plymouth Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
4126 Ingersoll Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312  
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667  
E-mail: [mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> This sermon is a first for me in that it draws its inspiration from an unlikely source: a Church Council meeting! The deliberations at the January 27, 2009 Plymouth Church Council meeting, ahead of the adoption of the 2009 budget, were a grace-filled exercise in faithful discernment. What a privilege to serve a church with that kind of leadership.

<sup>2</sup> But don't take my word for it. See the commentary of PHEME PERKINS in the *New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume VIII. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp.541-547.

<sup>3</sup> The rhythms of the Sabbath Day—sundown and sunup—clearly structure the telling of this story. “The passage is literally ordered by the sun.” Stephen W. Ramp. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. The Third Readings: The Gospels. Edited by Roger E. Van Harn. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001)O, p.181.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus' self-knowledge and sense of mission are highlighted by many commentaries. See Don Juel in the *Augsburg Commentary on The New Testament: Mark*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1990), pp.42-43 and *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox press, 1993), pp.134-142.

<sup>5</sup> Mark's favorite word!