

January 28th, 2024

Mark 1:21-28 “Read All About It”

Every now and then I prepare a sermon where I think, “Ugh. I didn’t have enough time to work on this, but it’ll have to do.” Then I end up getting all sorts of unexpected positive feedback and I’m like, “Okay. God works in mysterious ways.” Apparently, what I said last week regarding the nature of stories piqued some folks’ interest. I mentioned how journalist Christopher Booker wrote a book about how there are only seven basic plots or “meta-themes” to any story. Booker is not the first person to say something like this, nor will he be the last. Before Booker, George Polti said there were thirty-six plots. Ronald Tobias cut that number down to twenty. Booker took it down to seven. There’s even a popular school of thought that believes there is only one basic plot – The Hero’s Journey. I guess the smaller the number, the better. Me? I like to go the other way. I like new ideas, so I’d rather explore new genres and tropes than try to identify broader meta-themes. Trope is a word used to describe a convention that you can easily recognize and understand because you’ve seen it so often. Take for example the police story. This is a popular genre in literature and often fits into Booker’s “overcoming a monster” meta-theme. But you can narrow this genre down to different tropes like, “Rookie cop who is new to an assignment learns what it means to be a hero.” Or maybe, “The soon-to-be retired cop who takes on one last dangerous case even at the risk of his life.” Or, “Cop

with a spotty reputation tries to redeem themselves by making a heroic sacrifice.” And the list goes on.

For as long as I can remember I’ve liked comic books, especially superhero comic books. My parents were a bit concerned about this because they grew up in the McCarthy era when comic books were considered trashy and their publishers were accused of contributing to the rise of juvenile delinquency. My mom told me that she brought this concern to our family doctor who said, “Be happy that he’s reading.” Yay Dr. Gulick. Never mind that he often lit up a cigarette when he gave you his post-exam summary, I consider the guy a hero for justifying my comic book obsession. Sequential art (what we nerds call comics) has been around long before written language. The earliest cave paintings tell stories of heroic hunters who bring down large game to provide for their tribe. And the idea of the *superhero* has been a theme in some of the earliest classical writings like the Enuma Elish and even many stories in the Old Testament. They feature stories of heroes with superhuman strength and god-like attributes who protect the innocent. Something new and interesting was introduced to the superhero genre in 1905 though. Baroness Emma Orczy, a prolific fiction writer at the turn of the 20th century introduced a character called *The Scarlett Pimpernel*. Her novel is set during the French Revolution. The title is the assumed name of its hero and protagonist, a chivalrous Englishman who rescues French aristocrats before they are sent to the guillotine. Sir Percy Blakeney leads a double life.

He appears to be nothing more than a wealthy fop, but in reality, he's a formidable swordsman and a quick-thinking master of disguise. The band of gentlemen who assist him are the only ones who know of his *secret identity*. And there's the trope.

Think about that for a minute. Up until Orczy's novel, most superheroes didn't have a secret identity. They didn't need one. *The Scarlett Pimpernel* is considered a work of classic literature, but it didn't take long for the idea of a hero with a secret identity to find its way into pulp fiction. This is where we get Zorro, the Phantom, and the Shadow. When comic books became popular, and let's face it, comics were just illustrated pulp fiction, we were introduced to Batman (also known as Bruce Wayne) and Superman who had two secret identities – Kal El an orphaned alien from the planet Krypton, and Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet*. And of course, this trope became the standard for superheroes to this day. But why would someone who has the skills or powers that can help people in need feel like they've got to hide their identity? Here's our tie-in for today's scripture lesson.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was reluctant to reveal his identity as the Messiah. Jesus often said, "Tell no one" when someone witnessed a healing or some other miracle. In this morning's scripture, Jesus was teaching at a synagogue in Capernaum when all of a sudden this guy with an unclean spirit stood up and said, "What have you to do with us, Jesus

of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Now Jesus *could* have said, “Well, you’re right about who I am, but the only thing I’ve come to destroy are demons like you!” And then, “boom” he stands up, does a little “come out ye foul demon” gesture and all is well. That would have been an awesome flex, right? But that’s not what happened. What’s the first thing Jesus said to him? “Be silent!” He didn’t want the demon revealing who he was, especially in a synagogue. Oh, come on pastor, you’re exaggerating. Of course, he wanted people to know who he was. I mean, that’s the whole point of being the Messiah, right? The Messiah has come to save God’s people and restore God’s reign. How are people going to know about this if he’s being shy about it? This is just a one-off example pastor. You’re reading something into the text that’s not there. Okay, then let’s jump ahead five chapters in Mark’s gospel. A leader of a synagogue on the Sea of Galilee named Jairus came to Jesus and begged him to heal his daughter who was on the edge of death. And this was immediately after Jesus cast a legion of demons into a herd of pigs who then jumped off a cliff into the Sea of Galilee. And on his way to Jairus’ house, he healed a woman who was hemorrhaging for 12 years in a large crowd where there were many witnesses. Remember, this is Mark’s gospel we’re talking about here. Everything happens *immediately* in Mark. Jesus was on quite a roll here. So he heals this little girl and everyone there is absolutely amazed as they should have been. But Mark writes, “He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her

something to eat.” Again, he *strictly ordered them* that *no one* should know this.

So, was Jesus trying to keep a secret identity? By day he’s Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph the carpenter and humble traveling preacher. But by night? He’s the Messiah - Son of the Most High! One of the problems that Jesus was having, though, was managing the reputation he was getting even in this early stage of his public ministry. Now you’d think that if Jesus was so concerned about protecting his identity, he wouldn’t be out doing the kind of ministry that draws so much attention. He wasn’t out doing “run-of-the-mill miracles” like turning water into wine or feeding a crowd of folks with loaves and fishes. Right out of the gate, he’s casting out demons in some very public places in front of prominent religious leaders. The people who witnessed these miracles recognized something different in Jesus. The thing that set him apart from the garden variety miracle workers of his day – and there were many – was the *authority* with which he spoke. At least that seemed to be what got people talking about him the most. His teaching and healing caused the people around him to react in astonishment which then caused them to respond with the same type of urgency and authority to share the news of who they believed Jesus was. They wanted to tell other people, “You wouldn’t believe what I just saw!” So why would someone who wields that kind of authority want to keep his identity a secret? Surely, he understands that the more he teaches and performs miracles, the more people are going to be drawn to him. It’s

almost as if the mystery of his identity is *part* of Jesus' message.

In superhero comics, it's often the newspaper editor who is determined to reveal the hero's secret identity. Not for any kind of humanitarian reasons, though, but out of sheer sensationalism. The best example of this is in Spider-man stories. J. Jonah Jamison, editor of the *Daily Bugle* is obsessed with finding out who Spider-man is. He calls Spider-man a "web-headed menace" and comes up with all sorts of conspiracy theories to turn public opinion against him. Little does he know that one of his own employees, photographer Peter Parker, is the one behind Spider-man's mask. We eat this up though, don't we? Headlines on newspapers, magazines and newsfeeds shouting "Secrets Revealed!" compel us to subscribe or buy whoever or whatever is feeding our need to know what's *really* going on. But cheap bids for readership rarely leave us satisfied.

A few weeks ago, Lisa Blann and I were reminiscing about the illusionist Christ Angel and his show *Mindfreak*. But there was also a show called *Breaking the Magician's Code* that revealed the secrets to a lot of standard magic tricks like sawing a woman in half or making someone disappear. It was one of those shows where you're drawn in with the thrill of learning some kind of secret only to be left feeling disappointed because the mystery was gone. See, the mystery creates space within us to wonder about all the possibilities and compels us to watch more or read more to see if we can

figure things out for ourselves. It opens our sensibilities to believe what otherwise seems impossible.

Here's something to think about though. The point and focus of Jesus' ministry wasn't his miracles. The miracles weren't meant to wow people into believing that he was the Messiah. Every miracle that Jesus performed met a human need. He wasn't showing off in order to draw more people to him or prove he was the Messiah. That's ... tacky for lack of a better word. One of the first movies we watched in Faith and Films was called *Leap of Faith* where Steve Martin played the role of Jonas Nightingale, a sleazy traveling preacher who used cheap tricks to swindle people out of their money. The people who came to his revivals were hoping to be healed of whatever affliction they were dealing with. But Rev. Nightingale wasn't interested in helping people. He was running a scam that only benefitted him. Jesus didn't want people to come to him because he was a healer and a miracle worker. In the big picture, that wasn't what his ministry was about. He was all about reconciling people to God and preparing people for the reign of God on Earth. The healings and the miracles were to help people in need along the way. No wonder Jesus wanted to silence people who were amazed by these miracles! He didn't want groupies, he wanted to make disciples who could carry on his ministry. And yes, he gave the disciples a commission and the authority to heal the sick, clothe the naked and minister to the poor because meeting human needs was an important and essential part of his reconciliation ministry. We, as disciples, are expected to

follow his example in this way. But not in a cheap “trick you into following Jesus” sort of way.

Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching, healing, loving and speaking truth in a way that created space for people to wonder about alternative possibilities for their lives other than what is dictated to them with rules, laws, and commandments. People are compelled to follow him to see if they can figure out for themselves who Jesus is. People are open to believing the impossible because they see the impossible happening before their eyes.

Here's a question to take home with you this week - How do our actions as followers of Jesus reveal who Christ is to the world, not by shouting explanations about Christ's identity, but by acting in a way that creates space, compels, and opens others to believe what may seem impossible? May our words and actions today and always be a catalyst for reaching others with God's good news.