

"Today's Christian Church: Should I Run?"

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Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, February 5, 2023

Texts: Acts 4: 13-22 and Matthew 8: 38-34

There are Christians today who believe that in order to be Christian, one must believe that the Bible is the "inerrant" word of God. God spoke the word into the ear of the authors of the Bible, and therefore every utterance of God is direct, and therefore incumbent upon Christians to believe every word as historical, literal fact. On the other end of the spectrum are those who don't believe in inerrancy, so they "throw the baby out with the bathwater" and ignore the Bible completely, or at least ignore those verses they don't like (some even the whole Old Testament). And again, like with other issues, the church argues over which end is correct. Another pointless argument that makes it no surprise that people sometimes literally run from the church. So what are we, as Christians, called to do here? Do we pick one end of the spectrum, or do we run, all the while just keeping our mouth shut and hoping no one asks us anything about the Bible. We know we haven't read every word, and we know that some passages really bother us.

Brian McLaren, in his book, *Should I Stay Christian*, comes at this issue directly, using the story from Matthew that we read today, and its parallel verses in Mark 5: 1-20 and Luke 8: 26-39. Right away you can tell that if both of those versions have at *least* twice as many verses about the same story as Matthew that they can't be identical. How could God, who speaks the inerrant word use more words with one author than another? What details are included in Mark and Luke that are left out of Matthew? Are there any other discrepancies? And if there are, now what do we do? The anxiety rises. It bothers me how much the Church seems to revel in raising people's anxiety. By the end of this sermon, I hope to give you a different outlook, and I thank McLaren and others for helping to make this happen. I'm quoting him extensively this morning as he says what I believe in a much clearer way.

Before we begin, know that this biblical literalism is also at the center of the argument about the place of science related to scripture. Many others, most notably, Ken Wilbur, write tremendous volumes on not only the compatibility of science and faith, but how they are integrally related. One of Wilbur's books is actually named *Integral Spirituality*. Biblical literalism also gets into the never-ending argument over evolution and creationism. Again, it's a dualistic look where people are forced to be on one end or the other. Dualism is most often

destructive in any setting. Richard Rohr writes a great deal about that. At the end of the day, my caution to you, dear Christians, is to beware of dualistic, in-or-out thinking. Not only do I believe it's not faithful nor biblical, it also is destructive to human community and progress.

Here we go. McLaren has us begin with the notion that Jesus of Nazareth must have been so extraordinary as to become legendary. The Latin root of the word legendary means read, so the word suggests, "This person is so extraordinary that people will read about him or her in the future."

The word legendary can also mean fictitious. And many of us feel the tension between extraordinary and fictitious every time we read the gospels. According to McLaren, "When traditional Christians tell us that we have to take every word, every detail as literal fact, we find that hard to do, as much as we might like to. But that doesn't mean we must throw out the gospels -- and Jesus - entirely.

McLaren takes several pages of his book to explain this further, but in the interest of time, I want to simply list what he says and refer you to his book for more en fleshment. In short, the development of a legend follows a common literary process:

- 1) Someone lives an extraordinary life.
- 2) An oral tradition develops as people tells stories about the legend.
- 3) As stories are retold the details are changed due to faulty memory, the vivid imagination, or the dramatic storytelling instincts of the storytellers.
- 4) Differing versions of the original story spread.
- 5) When people are confronted with various versions, they decide which version fits best with their feelings about the hero.
- 6) As a result of this "natural selection", the extraordinariness of the hero is further embellished.
- 7) One or more of the stories is written down, and it is at that point frozen.

McLaren uses our gospel story for today, as well as Mark and Luke, to lay this out for us. The exorcism takes place in all three gospels (but not John, hmmm...), including the expelled demons sent into some swine, and the swine running off a cliff. Beyond their skeletal outline, the three stories differ in fascinating ways. In Mark's and Luke's versions, one man is exorcised. In Matthew's, two men are exorcised. There are several other details that differ -- which city is the setting (Gedara or Gerasa), what happened after the exorcism, etc. McLaren writes, "Biblical literalists try to reconcile these accounts, but their efforts feel forced at best. I find it much more plausible to acknowledge that legendary embellishment happens. It is a natural process and an interesting one, too.

Now I ask you: which one of the details are critical to this story? Does it matter what city he was in? Does it matter if one person, or two, were healed of a demon? By the way, conversation about demons is a whole other sermon, but in short, what was called a demon may have been anything from a serious illness, to mental illness of some kind, PTSD, or a variety of other possible explanations that science gives us today that didn't exist at the time of the story. Guess science does have a purpose for people of faith. Who would have guessed?

Here's where I believe the story in our gospel becomes not only the story of legendary founder, but also a story that we could emulate as people of faith. So rather than running from this story and its obvious issues for literalism, here's where I arrive (along with McLaren) that shows us why our Bible matters.

McLaren writes, "The miracle of the story, the magic in the story, wasn't an exorcism. It was love. Kindness drove out shame and self-hatred. Compassion looked beyond troubled behavior and saw not an evil monster to be chained but a fellow human being to be set free." I'm not sure that you and I have the ability to exorcise such demons from people, but I do know that love, kindness, and compassion are actions we *can* take. With a caution: like Jesus, we need boundaries as we try to heal another who is tormented. That, too, is a whole other sermon.

McLaren continues, "The diverse stories are not flawed historical accounts any more than an icon is a failed attempt at photo-realism. They are stories that have passed through the enhancement of individual and communal imagination to intensify their meaning...this story didn't stop with the man. Maybe the pigs were literary embellishment as well?" Does this truth ruin the story for people of faith? I think not.

The purpose and point of our Bible is at least two-fold: telling us of a God who loves us, and inviting us to live out our lives doing our utmost to mimic the behaviors of that God. Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith simply calls us to faithfulness, to love one another the way he loved us. Note in all three versions of this story that Jesus looked on the man (or men) with compassion, and even showed mercy to the one called a demon, or Legion. Now instead of arguing the details of the story, what if we in the church started to tell and to live *that* story? How would the world be different for our having been here if we lived a more Christ-like life? Everyone else rejected the man. Everyone else chained him up, became afraid of him, passed rules to contain him, and just plain avoided him. What instead did Jesus do? With that in mind, what is ours to do?

At the end of the day, the week, the month, or the year, that is the point of our Bible being our holy book. For in it we see the story of God and humanity, and we are left with the question, "what is for us to do as people of faith"? I leave you with that question. Answering that question will be a whole lot more fruitful than arguing the details of this or any other text in our Bible.

Today's gospel story asks, "what do we do, as people of faith, with someone who is tormented?" Why?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.