

PROPER 9, July 8, 2018, Year B

- Last week I invited you to *join me in some reflective imagining*. I suggested that this is an *effective* way for us to get into the Gospels. Stories from Scripture, and the work of many artists, can help us engage *the Word*. So *here is today's opportunity: We are in Nazareth! Yes ~ let's imagine that we are in the little village of Nazareth, in about the year 30 A.D.* We are gathered in our local synagogue for worship on the sabbath. And, *without our expecting it*, our young Rabbi with a messianic vocation enters, and begins to teach us ~ just as James Tissot portrays in the image I have given you. Here, we must *imagine* what Jesus says in his teaching. Because, *unlike Luke, Mark does not quote Jesus' actual words*.
- *Some of us in the synagogue begin to marvel, and raise questions about our experience of him. Who is this, we ask. And where did he get this wisdom? After all, he's from our village... and no one of any account has come out of this place. Don't we know his family? And aren't we familiar with his work as a local contractor? So what is he thinking, presuming to teach us, his peers and fellow residents? ~ He then responds to us, sounding more philosophical than angry. He says that 'wise people are not overlooked, except among those who think they already know them.'* And so, *he can do no deed of power here, unless perhaps to heal a few needy folks at the margins of our little community.*
- *He looks at us with astonishment. Why? Because, through him, the mystery of God's Kingdom is being opened before us. And he is beckoning us to enter. Except that we hesitate,* and come up with excuses. We find all kinds of reasons why we *cannot or will not* step out of our familiar, and largely *self-decided*, assumptions and expectations. *And so, he turns away,* and moves on *toward a more fruitful field*, in which he will plant his tiny seeds of insight. They are like *little gleaming pebbles*, dropped below the surface of a shallow stream. Unless we notice their glimmering nearness, and reach down to pick them up, they will *only tantalize* our curiosity. And yet, they

won't amount to *anything of value* until we collect them, and carry them with us. For these are *the small smooth stones*, which have the power to *knock down* what gets in the way of God's ongoing mission ~ as we learn from David's encounter with the Philistine giant, Goliath.

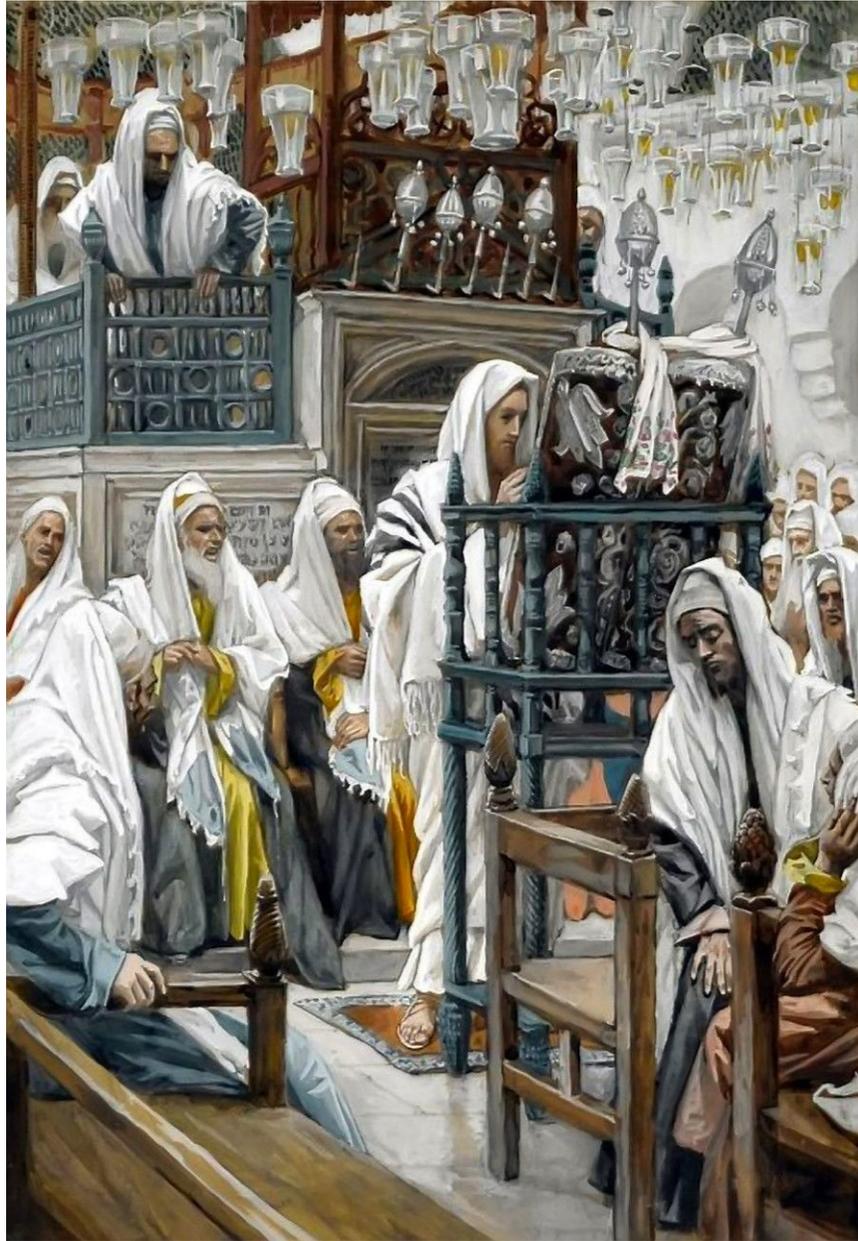
- To those who *follow* this rabbi, and who *accept* being sent by him, he gives *authority*. *Not regarding any existing power of their own*, which he might nurture and strengthen. *But, no, he gives his own authority, which they will bear in his name*. His words and his teaching *authorize* – that is, *his words and teaching make intelligible* those responses prompted by what he *gives and shares*. *His words and teaching make things happen!* What he says has *actual power*, manifest *not necessarily among material things*, but among *spiritual beings*. As in the rebellious spirits who seek to *undo him* and his work. And if his teaching makes things happen *among them*, it can also make things happen *among us*. That is, *if we listen, and hear, and then take into our conscious experience* what he has to say, and what we see him do. *[pause]*
- Have you ever wondered *why Jesus' apparently powerful words and actions seem not to have any great power among us, and in our daily life together?* I realize that *this is a provocative question*. And it is a question *I direct first toward myself, as I invite you to join me in considering it*. After all, we are *his people, and his fellow villagers and worshippers* in our little Nazareth synagogue. *Why, then, do we not see? Why are we apparently not outwardly and dramatically transformed by what he says and does here?* Two *unattractive* possible answers to these questions arise. *Either* it has something to do with *a limitation in him; or* it has something to do with *a limitation within us*.
- His follower and witness, *Mark, indirectly* invites us to consider these *questions*. But he does so *not* on the basis of *a prideful presumption, as if*

he, *himself*, was *immune* to the power of his implied questions. *Instead*, in his presentation of the Jesus story, he wants us to see that *we follow in the steps of the first disciples*, who were rather *slow, inattentive to nuance, self-preoccupied, and rather prideful* themselves. Mark *later presents* what may be a humble *self-portrait* of his and their fear and ignorance, when he describes an un-named young follower of Jesus. It is the young man who runs away naked from the scene of Jesus' arrest. Somebody grabs the young man's tunic, and he slips out of it, and flees from the terrible situation.¹

- So, we can see that, as *awkward* as these questions may be, they are *not unkind* questions. Mark's implicit questions are *not meant to shame* us or denigrate who we are, *nor undervalue* our potential to reflect, and then learn from the Teacher.
- Another one of Jesus' followers, *John*, later *writes this of Jesus, and of us* and of our little village: "He was in the world, ... yet the world did not know him. *He came to his own home and his own people did not accept him.* But" as John goes on to say *more positively*, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."² For –as *both* Mark and John *imply* or *suggest*– *if we, his fellow villagers, receive him for who he is, he gives us power to become children of God, who are born anew of God.*
- To see this, to *discern* its meaning, and to *benefit* from it, does not come to us *naturally*, or from *within* us. For flesh and blood do not reveal these truths to us, and we only learn them through the Son, in the Spirit, from our Father in heaven.³

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- Therefore, *if*—like some of our fellow villagers— we doubt him, if we hesitate to accept his teaching and overlook what he does, because we discount its apparently human source, we may miss the opportunity to enter, and live into, the beckoning mystery of God's unfolding Kingdom. This is the Kingdom that is manifest in him, through what he says, and in what he does.
- So, we gather here, as our forebears seemingly did, in this little Nazareth synagogue. We gather to hear and reflect upon the Word of God. As we do, let's be open, open to how unforeseen dimensions of God's mission may be emerging in our midst. For we may hear things we had not anticipated; we may see things we could not previously imagine. And we may begin to experience what we might only have dreamed of, before we came into this familiar space.



James Tissot, *Jesus Unrolls the Scroll in the Synagogue*

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Notes:

¹ See Mark 14:51-52, in context.

² See John 1:10-13 (NRSV), using the alternate translation for 1:11.

³ See Matthew 16:17 and 1 Corinthians 15:50.