

APRIL 25

Three things are rattling around in the corridors of my mind today, and I freely admit that I may be trying to make gold from straw in this note. My mental peas in a can are unrelated; but looked at together, I think something different than any of the individual matters or combinations of them emerges. I suppose the overarching subject was simply how do things happen?

Pansies, my grandson Liam just getting to the point of standing up, the creation of the gospel according to St. Mark (today is the feast day for this apostle)—these are what have captured my attention today. Anyone can see that these three things are about as different from each other as if we had a pear, a brick, and a bird feather tossed on a table.

There is no connection of any one item with either of the other two. But like that lint you can't seem to get off your favorite sweater, I've picked at these things all day while trying to figure out why they keep popping up in my mind. Now I think I know why.

I saw the pansies first, beginning a few days ago actually. They are in our faux barrel planter by our front door. Somehow, a stem or two wintered over, and now they're going great guns and slowly spreading, waking up old roots I thought were well frozen.

My son-in-law sent us a short video of our grandson, Liam, figuring out part of what it will take for him to stand up. You may not have thought about it much lately, but learning to walk is not only a complicated process, it involves a remarkable thing about human development—we are willing to stop doing what works—and actually reduce our effective, useful behavior—in order to pursue what works better in the long run.

This afternoon, I have been thinking about the gospel of Mark, which is a very elegant solution to a really serious problem in the early church: having a comprehensive, comprehensible, and communicable message for wide-flung congregations with increasing numbers of non-Jewish converts.

Pansies, if you don't rip them up or allow them to dry out completely under blazing sun or to get pierced to the root in winter, will carry on. Now given our summers and winters—not to mention aggressive groundskeeping—pansies don't stand much of a chance. But given a little weather/exposure luck and a less than complete instance of planter cleanup, pansies happen. We might say that the pansies by my front door are unexpected, but nothing new under the sun.

Liam's magnificent dedication to get upright (aren't babies the most resilient and persistent little people?) fascinates me. As I wrote above, they get worse at locomotion on the way to getting much better at it. The old step back one, step forward two idea. I have never been able to think of another creature who does this, to literally choose to

move less well on the way to moving better. About his behavior we can say it is new (to him) but predictable.

What about the gospel of Mark? By all the evidence, this was the earliest gospel. Legendarily connected to the apostle Peter as a kind of written form of his preaching and put into written form after his martyrdom in Rome and likely after the destruction of Jerusalem during the Jewish War 68-70 CE, the gospel we have received is not really a transcript or dictation. Sometimes a bit rough in style, in some places full of unexpected detail; in comparison with later gospels there are unexpected omissions (no Lord's Prayer, no resurrection appearances, etc), while John the Baptist has a significant role.

We need to recall that there were no literary models for gospels—oh, there were ways of telling stories, of presenting biographies, writing history, but the gospels were unique. Our best guess is that they were the fruit of gathering stories about Jesus, and THE story of the Passion and Resurrection. The purpose for Mark's gospel (a name we assign out of tradition), along with the other canonical gospels, seems to have been to collect and present material that could be used for instruction in the faith, spiritual formation, be a resource for evangelism and even defense of the faith. To do this, you need a narrative that functions as a widely agreed upon and widely available resource. This implies a lot of communication among far flung congregations, and an authority structure that could assess material produced, I think it is a mistake to presume that all Christians were miserable slaves, peasants, or urban poor.

In the end, as I wrote above, in short order the gospels were produced, their use as resources for the life, ministry, and purposes of Jesus among us were clear and obvious enough so that newcomers with no cultural common ground could be rooted in the radical vision of Christianity. THAT, my friends, is both unpredictable and unexpected. Religious movements are a universal phenomenon. Their persistence is not.

Pansies, babies learning to stand, human labors (inspired to be sure) to pass on to anyone interested the good news of God in Christ.