

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Sunday, February 4, 2017
Preached by Lisa M. Erdeljon

“Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.”

Why would Jesus not permit the demons to speak? Why would it be so important for Jesus to keep his identity a secret?

Today’s Gospel reading is from the Gospel of Mark. Believed by most scholars to have been written first, the Gospel of Mark is roughly dated to the end of the 60s CE, just after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem—an actual historical event during the first Jewish-Roman War.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a servant and the focus is on His miracles. (In comparison, just for your reference, in Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as Rabbi or King, with a focus on His sermons, and in Luke, He is portrayed as Teacher and the focus is on His teachings.)

It is in Mark’s Gospel that we get extensive crowds and numerous healings and exorcisms. Large turn-outs for big performances! We get exaggerated adjectives and verbs, filling Jesus’s days with one miracle after another after another. I mean, look! Last week’s Gospel and today’s Gospel are all the same day for Jesus! He teaches in the Temple, casts out a demon, heals a mother-in-law, and then cures and casts out many from the gathered crowd!

Along with these exaggerated descriptions, the Greek language in Mark tends to be rougher, with more verbs indicating a harsher or stronger action. Like Father Jesse said about last week’s Gospel reading, where Jesus was teaching “with authority”—the “authority was like being ‘struck hard by a fist’” The verbs in Mark’s Gospel are intense, almost violent.

In today’s Gospel, when Jesus does not permit the demons to speak, the Greek indicates an action—almost like the forceful putting on of a muzzle. As apposed to a casual comment of not doing something.

These strong verbs and exaggerated adjectives create the servant model of Jesus performing miracles as His primary task in Mark’s Gospel.

But again, why would Jesus not permit the demons to speak? Why would it be so important for Jesus to keep his identity secret? Why, with all these miracles, with all these crowds and the many healings and exorcisms, would Jesus NOT want people to know who He really is?

Remember, at this point, Jesus is not really anyone particularly special. At this point, Jesus is just a man—the grown up version of the baby born in a manger. Of course, though that is only slightly true in Mark’s Gospel. You see, Mark fails to mention anything about the infant narrative. Instead, Mark begins his big revelation with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That’s it! There is no inn, no virgin birth, no shepherds or wise men or special star. There is no escaping persecution as a child, and no teaching in the synagogue as an adolescent.

Instead, we start with the baptism of Jesus—in the Jordan River, by John the Baptist, and a voice from heaven saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” But, in Mark, there are no crowds. There are no witnesses to this opening up of heaven.

In fact, there are no crowds or witnesses present until Jesus appears in the Temple, which we heard about last week.

And so, at this point, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is just a man, in His early 30s, wandering Galilee—the region north of Samaria, north of Judea, nowhere near Bethlehem or Jerusalem.

It really isn’t even until now—until the second half of the first chapter of Mark—that we start to witness the fact that Jesus might actually be more than just a man wandering the towns of Palestine.

Granted we, as readers, are told at the beginning—like I said—when Mark states that this is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” But the readers are the only ones who know who Jesus is—or, more accurately, who Jesus will reveal Himself to be.

Well, it’s the readers and the demons who know Jesus. But I’ll come back to that...

So, why is it so important for Jesus to keep his identity secret? Why, with all the miracles, with all the crowds and the many healings and exorcisms, would Jesus NOT want people to know who He really is? Why is Jesus’ Messianic identity not revealed?

This idea—the idea that Jesus is intentionally not wanting His Messianic identity revealed—is called the Messianic Secret. First coined by William Wrede, a German scholar of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Wrede contends that Jesus is intentionally withholding His messianic identity for a specific reason.

There seems to be four main reasons, each of which has evolved over time and under scholastic criticism...

One, the concept of “Messiah” at the time of Jesus was very different than who Jesus actually was. It was a political leader—like a new King.

Two, the Good News is not really about Jesus—it’s not Jesus’ authority that is being revealed—it’s actually about the Kingdom of God and about God’s authority. It’s like saying, “Don’t tell anyone that I did this because really, I didn’t—someone else did.”

Three, it’s a literary tool—a type of narrative irony. Don’t tell anyone who Jesus is, but clearly that doesn’t work because the crowds are starting to know exactly who Jesus is—the man who can heal the sick and cast out demons. It’s all about narrative suspense.

Finally, four. No one can fully understand the message of Jesus as Messiah until they also understand Jesus as the Crucified. This is not about a man who was anointed by God to perform miracles and reveal the Kingdom of God in His world for all the crowds to witness. Instead, this is about the Revelation of God’s Mighty Works, which will be revealed at the Crucifixion—the killing of our Christ—and the Resurrection.

The readers know this—we all know who this man really is—because we already know what happens at the end. But for the crowds and apostles, Jesus is still just a man who can do miracles. And He will remain as that until he dies and rises again.

This Messianic Secret becomes a tool of stalling until the Divine Plan can fully unfold.

And in today's Gospel reading, when Jesus does not permit the demons to speak—this is the first instance in Mark of the Messianic Secret. In last week's Gospel, Jesus tells the demon "Be silent!" but in today's Gospel, Jesus "would not permit" the Messianic Truth to be revealed.

Like I said earlier, the verb here is rough, harsh, almost violent. Jesus is not simply saying, "don't talk." Jesus is practically forcing a muzzle on these demons. Forcing silence.

But, why, with all the miracles, with all the crowds and the many healings and exorcisms, would Jesus NOT want people to know who He really is? Why is Jesus' Messianic identity not revealed? Why is Jesus forcing the demons not to reveal His true nature?

Mark's Gospel defines Jesus as the Crucified Messiah. It is a "Gospel of Suffering" written for a suffering community. And when we are suffering, when we are waiting for the revelation of our own Christ—that's the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah—

When do we hear the Good News?

Is the Good News like, "Hey! So, I know you're struggling—having a rough day, a rough season, a struggle in life—but have you heard the good news?" Of course not! The Good News is like, **"I know you are suffering. I know you are struggling. And that's okay. Because Christ—Jesus—the Messiah also struggled, also suffered."**

Those who are witnessing Jesus's miracles can't understand the Messianic Secret because they are too distracted by their own suffering. Jesus calls to the suffering, to the broken in body and spirit. Jesus heals and "fixes" those who no one else will even touch or listen to...

Honestly, it's no wonder the Messianic Secret is so apparent in Mark's Gospel. With idiot disciples, confusing (and unexplained) parables, and only the evil or unclean knowing the truth—how are we to expect that all those crowds would truly understand that Jesus is the Messiah that must hang on a cross and rise from the dead. That Jesus is the Messiah that will come again in Glory, after having been born in a humble manger.

In our lives, in the Church, in Mark's Gospel, the Messianic Secret becomes a theological tool. It becomes a way to interpret who God is in the Incarnation. A way to better understand how the Incarnate God will live into God's Kingdom. A tool to reveal the Divine Plan of all our salvations.

If Epiphany is a celebration of the star pointing to the Divine Child, then this—the Messianic Secret—is why people still do not know who Jesus really is. This is why revelation was required time after time. Until finally, the greatest revelation.

Right now, in the Church calendar, we are still in the season of Epiphany—the season of the revelation of Jesus as Divine Infant. And the revelation of the beginning of His ministry here on earth. In a couple of weeks we will smear ashes on our foreheads and be reminded of our own deaths, as we begin the dark, repentant journey with Jesus to the Cross and His Death.

But if we don't know what that end will be—if we do not understand that the Cross, the Passion, the Crucifixion are all part of the Divine Plan for the Messiah—then how are we to ever understand that this man, wandering Galilee, is also the very same Messiah who will be the source of our salvation.

Jesus's miracles and the crowds that gather around Him and the demons who know Him by name—they are all part of Mark's Gospel, and we see all of them in today's passage from Mark.

And while, yes, we do see the Messianic Secret—the first time Jesus commands that no one shall reveal His Divine Identity. We also see a beautiful summary of Jesus's ministry. The last line of today's Gospel states, “And Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Jesus slowly reveals His true identity through His ministry, but at readers, as believers, as followers of Christ, we already know the secret. We already know that Jesus is the Messiah, and we are called to live into that knowledge, to revel in that revelation, and to live as we are called to live—as those who know and love Jesus the Messiah.

Amen.