

It's In The Script

Mark 6:1-6

July 9, 2006

I.

Have you ever watched these action movies, and all the ways in which the heroes and heroines always manage to escape through the danger and violence?

How does Harrison Ford in the Indiana Jones movies do it? How does he jump from an airplane with a beautiful woman, with no parachute, and all they have is an inflatable life raft that lands at exactly the proper angle on a mountain slope so they can ride it like a snow board to the bottom? How does Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible survive a bare knuckles fistfight without even getting a cut lip or losing a tooth? How are these things possible?

The answer is: it's in the script! Read the script and you can know what's going to happen. Read the script and you can know that all of those miraculous escapes were intended and planned from the very beginning.

Today's gospel is the same way. It points us to the script that governs our lives in faith. That script is the Bible, and it's real, not Hollywood. It tells us where we can look to find strength and guidance in our lives.

But we have the benefit of hindsight. We all know what the story contains because it is two thousand years old. People living in biblical times, however, were at a distinct disadvantage because they were actually living the history that we now read.

Today's lessons about Ezekiel from the Old Testament, and about Jesus in Mark's gospel, are good examples. They describe the perils of being a prophet—the difficulty of proclaiming the truth to people who are skeptical, or just don't want to hear it, even in your hometown.

I'm reminded of the story about the seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary, where I studied, who was being interviewed by his Bishop in order to be assigned to a parish. The seminarian told the Bishop that he would go anyplace in the diocese, except for the town of Hillcrest. The Bishop asked why he didn't want to go to Hillcrest, and the seminarian said "Well, that's my hometown, and Jesus said that a prophet is without honor in his hometown." The bishop hesitated, smiled and said, "Son, don't worry. No one will mistake you for a prophet."

II.

Ezekiel is a classic example of an Old Testament prophet. Today's reading describes how God commissioned Ezekiel, against his will, to proclaim the truth of God's word to the disobedient people of Israel. This happened with the Old Testament prophets. God sent them to call the people back to their covenant with God, which they repeatedly had ignored or broken. The people did not heed the warnings, and as a result lost the promised land and went into exile.

And those prophets were not popular people. They frequently were stoned, run out of town, despised and isolated, and some were killed for what they said.

Now, with that as some biblical background, let's fast forward about six hundred years to the time of Jesus in Palestine. In last week's gospel we heard how the leader of the local synagogue sought Jesus out to save his dying daughter because the man had faith; he believed. This week we have a story in Nazareth that stands in sharp contrast to the events of last week's Gospel, which occurred only a few miles away.

Here we have Jesus, the home town boy who made a name for himself. He put tiny Nazareth on the map, and was besieged by adoring crowds wherever he went throughout Galilee. Now he was coming home.

Don't you think the people would have welcomed him? Shouldn't they have put up banners, held a parade, and honored him? This was the man who could have transformed Nazareth from a sleepy backwater village into something special. Didn't the people realize that? Jesus could have made Nazareth into a religious center unrivaled in the region. Pilgrims would have come from all over to see where Jesus grew up. Why did the people reject him?

What happens when Bret Favre of the Green Bay Packers comes home to Kiln, just down the road from us? Do they treat him like the people of Nazareth treated Jesus? Of course not. What was there about Jesus in Mark's Gospel today that made Jesus different?

III.

The answer is that they thought Jesus was not respecting his origins. The unspoken words from the people of Nazareth were, "Who does he think he is?" Here was Jesus, preaching and teaching and being called a rabbi by his disciples, and the people thought they knew better.

He's no rabbi, they thought, he's just a carpenter's son. He has had no formal education, no training like our other rabbis. Why, he hasn't even gone to seminary. He's got a lot of nerve coming back here and telling us what to do and how to live our lives.

And as a result, because of their lack of faith, because of their unbelief, they missed out on the miracles and healings that Jesus had done elsewhere. Here was the man who spoke to the wind and it obeyed. Here was the man who raised a young girl from the dead. He was now among his own people, and yet he could do not mighty works because of their unbelief.

Now, this does not mean that Jesus lacked the power to offer healing. Mark told us that Jesus did lay hands on a few people and cured them. No, the people's lack of faith did not interfere with Jesus' power to give, but rather prevented them from having the capacity to receive.

They were used to having things their way, based on how they understood things, and they were unwilling to listen to the truth. They wanted to accept Jesus on their terms, and not his terms. Their prejudices and their skepticism got in the way of understanding God's goodness and love, and prevented them from knowing God's plan for their lives through Jesus Christ.

IV.

Are there times when people today do the same thing? Can we think of situations where people who profess to be Christians have become so complacent about their relationship with the Lord that they cannot receive the blessings God has in store for them?

We all have heard the old saying about how if it looks like a duck, and acts like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it must be a duck. Can we say the same thing about Christians? If people look like Christians, and act like Christians, and sound like Christians, does it mean that they are Christians?

Well, let's consider an example. Suppose that I am driving down the road and see Jesus standing there as a hitchhiker. Now I realize this is just an example, but I use it to make a point. I see Jesus standing there and what if I would stop and say "Hey, Jesus, going my way? Hop right in. Glad to have you along." What's wrong with that picture? The problem is that my attitude is focused on doing things my way, not God's way. I am relying on my own knowledge; not God's will as revealed through the Holy Spirit.

Like the people of Nazareth two thousand years ago, I would be following my own view of the truth, and not God's truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And today's gospel about Jesus hometown two thousand years ago raises an interesting question. Where would be Jesus' hometown today? Where would he go to be with his people, and would he be treated any differently? Is there a place today where Jesus could be present; where he can do mighty works among the people?

The answer clearly is yes, there is such a place. Jesus' hometown now is the Church. The church is his body and we are his hands and feet, and his eyes and ears. In just a few minutes well will celebrate the Holy Eucharist, and Jesus will be present in the bread and wine as we partake of them.

And Jesus also is present in the church the rest of the week as well. As the church we are called to be a witness to the community seven days a week, and to act in truth and faith so that Christ can work through us to transform peoples' lives.

I already have seen examples of this in my short time here at St. Thomas. I have seen and learned about your work with hurricane relief, and programs for those battling addiction, and your genuine interest in being a real part of the community.

Not all churches are that way. Over the years I also have seen churches more interested in the trappings of worship than the realities of a relationship with the Lord. I have seen churches where the service bulletin was more important than the Bible; churches where the people paid more attention to the length of the sermon than its content; and places where the people didn't want a priest for the church they built, but a curator for the museum they created.

We have heard about churches like that, and today's Gospel tells us that those are not places where God's work can be done as God intends it to be done. And unlike the people of Nazareth in Jesus' time, people today cannot claim that they don't know.

Two thousand years ago people did not have the benefit of Scripture and biblical history. They actually were living the history that we read today. The gospels had not yet been written, there was no organized church, and Paul had not yet been converted on the road to Damascus. Perhaps, in hindsight, we should cut them a little slack if they were confused or had doubts.

But today, things are different. We know the story and what happened, and we know what it means for us. How do we know? Like I said at the beginning, it's in the script. We know what we are called to do. We know if we invite Jesus into our lives he will be there. We know if we extend ourselves into the community we will be living one of the two greatest commandments.

V.

In many ways the gospel for today is our story. It points to the pitfalls of trusting in our own strength rather than God's power. It is not always easy to surrender to God's will; to leave things at the foot of the cross. The temptation to control things is great because we are not sure what will happen if we leave it to God.

Sometimes we might just ask, why doesn't God just send us a memo, or an e-mail, telling us what to do. Or don't we just wish that an angel would appear, or a heavenly voice would speak, and just point the way.

That is unlikely to happen. But we are not without resources to help us along the way. Just like the action movie heroes who always prevail because that is the way the script is written, so also there is another script that can help us prevail. Our answers are there. It's in the script. All we have to do is read it, and believe. *Amen.*