*He Commands, They Obey*

Mark 1:21-28

During my elementary school days we had to take a path at the end of the street, through a woods to get to the elementary school in the next neighborhood. On the way, through that path, was an old, dilapidated house that we believed was certainly haunted. One day my brothers and sisters (5 of us) decided it was time to be brave and explore that old house. Ignoring the “keep out” signs I following my siblings through the front door and my eyes instantly fell on the stairs leading to the second floor. On those stairs were an endless array of buttons scattered all the way up and down. Almost immediately we felt the presence of a ghost and without much delay, ran back out the door, down the path and a whole block of our street before we stopped to catch our breath. We began to generate stories about the ghost that lived in that house and created a story about those buttons and why they were scattered all over the stairs. It was not difficult to believe the stories that we made up. We not only told our stories to other kids but found out that others had their own stories about the ghost that lived in the old house. Because of the experience we had in that house, it was not hard to believe their stories as well. Looking back as an adult, we now know that those stories were fabrications of our own imaginations and can discredit them as products of young minds seeking adventure and fantasy. We became skeptics and cynics as we matured and through more logically about life and its many mysteries.

As adults, we do become more skeptical about things we cannot touch, taste, see, hear or sense. We hear stories about Jesus and the many miracles he performed, but we try to find explanations about how those miracles actually happened, especially about casting unclean spirits out of a person. We want to rationalize that whole event by saying the man was mentally unstable, insane or just plain off his rocker, but not possessed of spirits and demons. We want to explain away the many miracles Jesus performed. Why do we have such a hard time believing what Jesus did and what Jesus can do today? I think it might, in part, be that we don’t want to believe in a whimsical, capricious God who will do what He will do. We don’t want to believe that God is capricious about who get a miracle and who doesn’t. And maybe we don’t want to be the one who God passes by, the one who doesn’t get a miracle. So we try to find logical explanations for those “miraculous” healings and recoveries. We try to get scientific about why some with the same disease live and why others die. God isn’t supposed to show favoritism. And good people die just as much as those who are not so good. So what’s going on with God?

Part of the answer can be found in today’s scripture. First things we observe is that, according to Mark, this is the first time Jesus taught in the synagogue after he called his disciples. And people took notice. He taught as one who seemed to have an internal authority, not like the teachers who quoted scripture and other learned teachers. People recognized a unique authority. He had their attention. But that wasn’t enough. He followed his teaching with a miracle. It was not important whether the man had a demon or unclean spirit. What was important was that something significant changed the way people felt about him. Not only did Jesus had authority in his teachings, but followed them up with something spectacular. Jesus could change lives. It was not hard for people back then to believe that the possessed man actually had a demon within him, especially in an age where superstition was prevalent. What was hard to believe was that a man had the authority to fix people. The people were amazed at what they witnessed. Here was somebody very different, a man with authority to cast out demons. He opened up the possibility that people would see what he could do on behalf of God who sent him. He could get people to believe the unbelievable. Jesus had purpose in what he did and who he cured. He wanted to draw attention to the new thing that God was doing. If he had not accomplished the things he did, his death would have gone unnoticed and the story of resurrection would have been a passing fantasy for a few years. From the very beginning of his ministry he set the stage for antagonistic response from the religious authorities and his eventual crucifixion and resurrection. The miracles he performed opened up the possibility of belief.

We do not have the privilege of watching Jesus at work and listening to his words the way those early disciples did. But God continues to bless this world with miracles for purposes that only He may know. We cannot choose those miracles for God and we cannot see the whole picture. But we can know that there is purpose in what seems a random series of events. It isn’t that God pulls the puppet strings to make someone get sick or experience tragic and painful event. It’s more that God is there to shed new light on those events, light that can lead us eventually to greater faith and deeper understanding of the God who created us. God is not a capricious God, but one who is deeply concerned about each of His beloved creations and is present no matter what the circumstances. But we do have a hard time believing that, because we want explanation and answers. We want to know why! But we find that it’s a matter of trusting first then believing that good will come out of any ugly or painful circumstance. It is a matter of believing that God will be with us as we travel through life’s many ups and downs. God moves us into deeper understanding of life and its purpose through our life situations. There are deeper healings than we realize waiting as we learn to trust. Our God is a good God who doesn’t want us to suffer, but knows that it is in our suffering that we find life’s deeper meanings. God knows we will suffer and experience turmoil in our lives. But God also knows that He has set the stage for healing of a deeper nature, the healing of our souls.