

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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9 July 2006

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Mark 6:1-13

We've all heard the one about the flood. A town was being overtaken by flood waters and there was this one particular man, a deeply religious person, who really wasn't worried about the flood because he knew that God was good and trustworthy and had promised to deliver him. He knew that God would keep the promises God had made. So when the evacuation horn sounded, he stayed where he was, confident that he was safe. As the waters started to climb and swirl around his house, his last departing neighbor called to him and urged him to come with them, but he said no, God is good and God will deliver me. I'll stay where I am. The waters climbed higher, and eventually the man had to go to the second floor to stay dry. He was looking out the window, checking out what was left of his community when a boat came along and offered him rescue; but again he calmly said, God is good and God will deliver me. The waters continued to swirl and climb until finally the man climbed up on the roof and sat down by the chimney to wait out the storm; which is where he was when a helicopter came by, dropped him a rope and urged him to come aboard. But again, just like he had before, faithful to the very last, he declined saying, God is good and God will deliver me. Unfortunately, it was only a matter of time after that before the waters got high enough to sweep the man away and he drowned in the flood. When he got to heaven and God greeted him kindly he said, I don't understand. You promised to deliver me, you promised you'd always be with me, you said I had nothing to fear – how could you let me drown in the flood? To which God said, I sent you an alarm, a neighbor, a boat and a helicopter; what more do you want?

What more do you want? I don't know how they would have answered the question, but it's clear that the people of Nazareth wanted more than the kid next door. They'd been waiting for deliverance for generations, waiting for a Messiah, waiting for a strong army, thunder and lightning, the mighty hand of God to sweep in, clear away Roman rule and poverty and illness and crime in the streets and broken hearts and everything else that ailed them. What they got instead was an uppity young man who thought he knew everything. You know how it is: when you've watched someone grow up, seen them stumble around in diapers, play in mud puddles and pick on frogs, wear braces on their teeth and struggle with acne, it's hard to see them as special or hear their words as wise or bow to them as ones with authority.

Up until that day, Jesus had been on a roll. He'd cured a leper, healed a paralytic and a woman who'd been plagued with hemorrhages for 12 years, and gave life back to Jairus' daughter. But then he decided to take his message home – and home would have nothing to do with it. He began to teach in the synagogue and the people were amazed, both at his words and at the rumors of what had been going on down the road. And rather than throw a ticker tape parade for the

hometown boy who'd made good, they turned on him. Where did he get all this? Where does all this wisdom come from? Who does he think he is? He's just a carpenter, for heaven's sake. His brother works at Walmart, and his sister waits tables at Applebee's. He's Mary's boy, and that comment came with a roll of the eyes that no one would have missed; remember all those rumors that swirled around when Mary got pregnant? No mention of his father; never has been a story the locals were ready to buy. No way, Jesus, not here. Don't think you can parade your mighty ways with us. We know you too well for that. And since they were so sure of themselves and of Jesus, they shut the door on what he offered. He could no deeds of power there. Cured a couple of colds, but nothing more than that. And the story tells us he marveled at their unbelief.

Isn't it striking how closed minds and hardened hearts can cut even God off at the pass? For that's what we're dealing with in this story: not just the man who used to be a kid next door, but with God. As one commentator says, the issue that runs under this story, deeper than the theme, "familiarity breeds contempt" is the scandal of the incarnation. "The word made flesh". He writes, "We want a two-fisted God who comes up like thunder, and we are offended by one who puts himself/herself at our mercy and who now and then looks a lot like our Uncle Fred." (Jim Callahan, *The Christian Century*, June 21-28, 2000, page 679)

That writer goes on to say:

What that poor crowd of Nazarenes was cutting off at the pass had to do not only with God, but with their neighbors and spouses and children, and whatever they knew of community. It was probably a world where anyone who cooked was just a cook, any tradesman just a competitor, any lawyer just a crook. Anyone's wife was just a woman, anyone's daughter was a nuisance. It was a bleak world, with no wonder, no enticing mystery, no great expectations and precious little hope... (same)

The Word was made flesh. God came to dwell in Jesus – but not just in Jesus. God dwells in each of us as well, and in the kid who lives next door, and in the person who stutters and stumbles, whose work is less than perfect, whose mind wanders and whose words don't always make sense. God is at work in each of them and in each of us – and if our minds are closed to seeing such things, if our hearts are hardened against the gifts that everyday people carry, we just may miss God. If God can send a neighbor, a boat and a helicopter to save a drowning man, why can't God also come to us in the people who are an everyday part of our lives? Why can't God also use us and send us as agents of rescue and messengers of grace?

The second part of the gospel lesson this morning describes Jesus sending out the twelve disciples. There are explicit instructions about how they should go, what they should carry (or more precisely, what they shouldn't carry) with them: just a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, only one tunic and only sandals. It sounds pretty lean and mean, but it also occurs to me that part of the point is to not get distracted by trappings and tools, glitzy power point presentations, classy fashions from Gap or Talbots, or an impressive string of credentials. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases in *The Message*, Jesus seems to be saying: Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. *You* are the equipment.

One of the stories I love about First Parish is a story Dave Holigan tell. When the family moved to New Hampshire, they looked for a church where they could be involved and raise their

children. They went to one church and were kindly told that they'd probably be happier in a different church, one that had more children. They went to another church and became members, they took their kids to Church School, and even taught a class – but struggled. Their kids didn't quite seem to fit in, and very honestly, they weren't impressed with the other kids they met there. But they stayed. Dave took a group to Horton Center, and had a very tough week with some very difficult kids. One of the other units at camp that particular week just happened to be from First Parish. And over the course of the week, as he observed the character of those First Parish youth, how they treated their leaders and other campers, how they behaved in camp, the ways they got involved in the activities at Horton Center, he began to think this might be a church where they could be at home. It was the youth of this congregation who drew a family here, suggested the welcome they'd find, and the ways in which God is present and at work among us. Nobody fancy or special or highly trained. No theological doctrine or extravagant program. It was the down-to-earth, everyday fun and celebration and energy of our children that lit the sign of God's presence and called to a family to come and see and be at home.

We can spend our lives looking for God to come in wind and earthquake, in dramatic miracles and heart-stopping appearances – and if we wait long enough, God may well come to us in one of those ways. But in the meantime, we're bound to miss a whole lot of grace and love and presence. The Word was made flesh, and not just in Jesus but also in us, and the mystery and truth of that incarnation is that wherever we go in suffering, in hurt and sorrow and despair, God has gone there first, goes with us, and is glad to be there with us and for us. The writer I referenced earlier frames the reality this way:

Yes, (Jesus') mama was Mary, and he had sisters and brothers with names and faces and backaches. The Gospels proclaim that God was his father, and he proclaimed that God is your father and mother too... When we begin to really believe that, when we seek God in the ordinary, daily wash of things and find God in nothing more complicated than each other and in God's beautiful, dangerous, gorgeous creation, "mighty works" begin to happen. Works of mercy and compassion. Works of healing and commiseration. Works of forgiveness and understanding and of great laughter. (same)

May we, through the grace of God, open our eyes and our hearts to see and recognize and embrace the presence and miracles, power and work of God in our very midst, confident that as we do so, mighty works will begin to happen here and now and through us.

Amen.