

## **Divine Interruptions**

*A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church*

Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

One of the perks of being in a new church is that I have lots of great stories about things that happened at my former church that I couldn't necessarily share there, that now I can share here with you.

And one of those stories took place during worship one week on the first Sunday of the year. I remember we didn't quite have a full sanctuary that day, because lots of folks were still out of town for the holidays, so you could see pretty clearly around the room – no one was blocking your view. And a new family joined us for worship that day. A man, woman, and two or three small children, who didn't live far away, had walked to church that morning, and they were sitting just a couple rows back from the front of the sanctuary.

Not long after worship began, another man walked down the aisle and squeezed himself into the pew beside them. And if you were paying attention, you could tell that his presence that morning was quite the surprise – the man and woman were definitely not expecting him to show up.

And this man, we'll call him Man B, was not happy at all to see Man A sitting there with this woman. Man A had his arm around the woman, so Man B put his arm around the woman, too. They tried to go through the motions of worship with us - when we would stand, they would stand, and when we would sit, they would sit, but you could also tell that Man A and Man B were glaring at each other and exchanging choice words with one another the entire time.

Tensions continued to rise between them, and remember that they were at the very front in the sanctuary, so everyone was watching this unfold. And then all of the sudden, we stood to sing a hymn, and Man A turned around smacked Man B on top of his head with a hymnal.

Well, Man B was flabbergasted, and so he threw his hands up in the air and stormed out of the sanctuary, while the rest of us continued awkwardly singing the rest of the song, not sure what in the world we should do. So we just kept going along in worship.

Until a few minutes later, one of the ushers tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Mary Alice, the police are here. They got a phone call from a man that says he was assaulted during worship at Calvary Baptist Church and they're here to check it out."

So then, we tried to quietly approach Man A, the woman, and children, and escorted them out of the sanctuary (right before the sermon started) so that they could talk to the police about what happened. We learned from them that Man B had unexpectedly gotten out of jail that

weekend, and he was not happy to find out that Man A was in worship with his arm around this woman and her children.

Some of our church members walked home with the woman and children and made sure they felt safe, and we checked back in with them for several weeks. We never did find out what happened to Man A or Man B, but I've always thought about the game Clue when I remember this story, because who would ever guess that the crime took place with the hymnal in the sanctuary at Calvary Baptist Church in Waco?!

In today's text, another sort of disruption takes place at the temple, and what usually would have been a rather uneventful day at the synagogue quickly becomes the talk of the town.

We aren't told exactly what Jesus is teaching about, but what we do know is that he seems to know what he's talking about, which totally catches people off guard that day. They immediately begin to say to one another, "This guy is teaching like he's an authority on God or something! He doesn't have the credentials to act like that. Who does this guy think he is?"

And just as they are peering around at one another, things really begin to get crazy. A man who is possessed by a demon cries out, "What do you have to do with us! Get out of here, Jesus!" But Jesus quickly commands the demon to come out of this man. Well, the congregation is astounded by what in the world is going on in the temple that day. And soon, word begins to spread all around town about this Jesus.

Usually, when you and I hear a story like this, we probably imagine ourselves as the innocent bystander, from the outside looking in. But this morning, I'd like to invite us to step into the story.

Perhaps you want to step into the life of the church-goer who was expecting an ordinary day of worship at the Temple. I imagine that this isn't quite what you had in mind when you went to the temple this morning. I imagine you might have expected this to be a quiet, peace-filled, Sabbath day – a welcome break from the hustle and bustle of the week.

Or, perhaps you want to step into the life of the man who is so caught off guard by Jesus he cries out, "Who do you think you are? Get out of here, Jesus!" This man who is overcome by something that has so much power over him – he doesn't even realize that it's there. All he knows is that this Jesus is really disturbing his status quo.

Whoever you are, as you sit in worship this morning and see all of this unfold, you are completely off guard. It's as if someone has just smacked you on the side of the head with a hymnal in the middle of worship. But, perhaps that is like what happens when we invite Jesus into our worship and into our lives.

As Bible scholar Will Willimon points out, “Maybe it’s good for us to remember that when we welcome Jesus into our worship, when we ask him to speak a word into our lives, his presence and his words can be discomfoting. Jesus comes among us, but not always in the ways that we expected, not always saying the things we want to hear.

I wonder if the church over-stresses Jesus as reconciler, peace-maker-Jesus, the one who stills the storms of life. When the reality is that many times, Jesus is actually the disturber of the peace, the beginning of the storm. That is at least the way it is for the folks in the synagogue at Capernaum that day.”<sup>1</sup>

And when I place myself in their shoes, I begin to wonder if my response to Jesus might been the same.

Friends, when is the last time your life has been completely and totally disrupted by Jesus? Have you ever found yourself saying, “Don’t mess with my picture-perfect plans! Don’t mess with my comfortable and familiar life. Don’t mess with my security and stability. Get out of here, Jesus!”

Pastor and author Mark Yakonelli tells a sobering story about a call he once got from a very committed woman in his congregation. She was so upset she could hardly speak that day. She has just gotten off the phone with her college-age son, who had shared with her that he was going to drop out of college to join a group of Americans who were going to Iraq to be with Iraqi civilians during the bombing and occupation.

Their goal was twofold — not only to work in a children’s hospital, but to do so as a visible presence of American citizens in an Iraqi space. They hoped their presence would provide extra layers of protection to the Iraqi civilians in the community, as well as to increase awareness about the suffering of this community back home in America.

Hearing all of this, the mother was unbelievably upset. For years, she had planned for her son to go to college. They had prepared, saved money, applied to schools across the country. And he had made a commitment to his studies, she told him. And she was helping to pay for it! This was no time for him to do something so reckless, and to engage in such “radical politics.”

Pastor Mark on the other end of the phone asked her how her son responded. And that’s when she got really quiet.

With a lump in her throat that soon became a sob, she recalled how her son had said, “but mom, this is about following Jesus. We’re going as a Christian group. Didn’t you and the church teach me that Jesus was always befriending people who were weak and suffering? This is where I believe Jesus wants me to be, too.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Will Willimon’s Pulpit Resource*, Abingdon Press, 2021.

Pastor Mark waited in silence while the mother cried on the other end. Then with a hint of resignation in her voice, she finally said, “He’s right, you know. I know he’s right. But if I had known that he was going to grow up and do something like this I would have taken him out of the church and put him in Boy Scouts instead.”<sup>2</sup>

Because sometimes, following Jesus completely disrupts all that we had imagined for our lives. And we just want to say, “Who do you think you are? Get out of here, Jesus!”

You see, I can’t help but wonder if you and I are seeking comfort when Jesus is pushing us to break through our carefully constructed comfort zones. I wonder if we are looking for peace and unity when Jesus actually wants us to get riled up about the injustices in our midst – like the demon he called out right there in the middle of the temple itself. I wonder we are seeking safety and stability when Jesus knocks us over the head with a hymnal and says, “Hey, come follow me!”

I fully recognize that this is not the popular sermon to preach, and the benefits of these pandemic times are that you could very well “change the channel” this morning and hear lots of other sermons that might make you feel more comfortable.

And yet I fully believe that whenever Jesus disrupts our plans, challenges our boundaries, and disturbs our lives, he does so in ways that always turn out for good. Because we follow a God who, by God’s very power at work within us, is always able to do more than we could ever dare to ask or imagine.

The question is – are we ready for that? Are we in? It’s actually not a rhetorical question - it’s a question I have for us particularly as a church this morning.

I’ve started working with our staff and deacons to discern some of the biggest needs of our community and how God is inviting us to reimagine our work and witness as a church post Covid-19. Because I’m mindful that when I was having these kinds of conversations with the pastor search committee about year ago, the landscape of the world, and of Highland, was drastically different.

For instance, when I asked the search committee about one of the biggest challenges facing Highland, their immediate response was...PARKING! And I can confidently say that since March of 2020, there has not been a single day that parking has been an issue for us at Highland.

Instead, when I’ve asked about the biggest needs within our community, our deacons have said things like this:

- We are so isolated and weary. We need peace, even in the midst of the chaos. We need to know we’re not alone.

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<sup>2</sup> This wonderful story was shared in sermons by my friends Jakob Topper and Emily Hull McGee and can be found here: <https://firstonfifth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Luke-14.25-33-Sermon-9.8.19-1.pdf>

- We need support for mental health. Data shows that we are in the worst mental health crisis since World War 2. How can the church respond?
- We need fresh language, agency, and imagination to move beyond our wounds. We are a community of people who have been scarred and have found safety and love at Highland. But how do we now take that next step forward?
- We need to be connected with a more diverse group of people. Especially during Covid-19, many of us are constantly in “safe, white silos.” We need to hear from and be in relationship with a more diverse group of people.

And those are only a handful of the responses I’ve received. Each month, our deacons are going to be responding to a big question affecting the life of the church and our surrounding community in these days as we work together to re-imagine where God is leading us, and what church will even look like, when we come back together again.

And the thing is, I believe this is going to be hard work. After more than a year of separation, not to mention a long interim season, I believe we are going to need a fresh vision of where we go from here. And that’s exciting to me! But I also acknowledge it won’t always feel comfortable, safe, or familiar. Church is going to look different after Covid – and I believe that as we imagine a way forward, this work is going to challenge to move beyond our comfort zones and to stretch us in ways we never thought possible.

And, if you and I have the audacity to invite Jesus into this hard and holy work – into our prayers and dreams and wildest imaginations – well, I believe it could really shake things up.

As Annie Dillard writes, “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of [their] conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we casually invoke [when we gather as the church]? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?”

Churches are [like] children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,” she says, “mixing up a batch of TNT on a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats or velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets [instead].

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”<sup>3</sup>

And so, Highland Baptist Church, let’s put our crash helmets on and get ready for the work God is calling us toward in the days ahead. Because we never know where following Jesus together will take us, or when he might bop us on top of the head, but one thing is guaranteed: it’s going to be a wild ride. I hope you’re buckled in.

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

## **Benediction**

Friends,

May God's love lead us to do what we've never done before.

May Christ's calling compel us outside of our comfort zones of familiarity.

And may the Spirit unsettle us as we leave this form of worship –

And go out, with our crash helmets on – into the worship that is our very lives.

Amen.