

The Untaming of Jesus
Matthew 17:1-9

You probably have no idea what I go through each week when I put together the worship service; the dilemma I face: what language should I use this week? Not English vs. Spanish or some other language, but historical vs. modern. Church language or the vernacular. For example, should we have a traditional call to worship, one that comes from the Psalms, like this one?

There is none like you, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.
**All the nations you have made shall come
and bow down before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.
For you are great and do wondrous things,
you alone are God.**

Or something like this:

We have gathered this morning to worship God.
We have come seeking comfort, inspiration, community and insight.
We have come to open ourselves to the power of God's presence in our midst.
**We have come to offer up the seasons and turnings of our lives, and to ask God's help
in our learning and growing.**

When I first got out of seminary there were only the first kind to be found in resources for planning worship, at least that's all I ever saw. The language was high and lofty, quite formal; not at all the way most of us speak. It was very distinctive 'church language.'

But in the years that followed I started seeing more and more resources come out that offered "fresh" liturgies for "modern" worshipping communities. The implication was clear: to be relevant and up-to-date you didn't necessarily have to go the way of non-liturgical churches that had just a couple of non-specific prayers, a bunch of singing, and a message, but if you were going to be a liturgical congregation you did need to do something about your 'old,' stale prayers and liturgies, like you might need to air out your musty old sheets on a warm, breezy spring day. They had gotten dry, and tired, and flat after too many years of rote repetition. The foreignness of the stilted language had ceased to carry meaning for modern worshippers.

And maybe we should say post-modern worshippers, because something else was happening at this same time. We had become post-modern, or maybe we were just realizing that we had become post-modern. The world had sped up. The world had flattened, to use Thomas Friedman's words. Over the last few decades, people had seemed to become less reliable, and technology had become more reliable. Our heroes were more likely to come out of Hollywood or the basketball court or MTV, than they were Washington, or NASA, or even the pulpit. People weren't as likely to believe something, to trust something, just because someone else said it was so. There were too many other ways to get your information now, too many other choices to be limited to the one your parents or preacher or president told you was the right one. We had just

been lied to and disappointed too many times: Watergate, Vietnam, Chappaquiddick, the pastoral office....

The upshot of all of it, at least for us in the church? Two things. First, authority doesn't mean the same thing to people that it used to. Father no longer knows best. Now everyone's an expert, and no one's an expert. At the same time that leaders and authority figures have let us down, everyone has access to all kinds of information on the internet, and people are cobbling together their own truth, or as Stephen Colbert says, truthiness – the "truth that comes from the gut, not books," (*Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report," October 2005*) or "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (*American Dialect Society, January 2006*). So what that means here is that people are picking and choosing among the array of beliefs that appeal to them. Some Christian, some not-so-Christian, all melded together into custom belief systems that fit the sensibilities and lifestyles of each individual.

And the second is a direct result of the first. People are becoming unchurched. Some of them have actually left the church. They find the church too judgmental, or even hypocritical, or just plain archaic and irrelevant. Some never were churched to begin with. But what I'd like to suggest is that many of those unchurched are still here, they're still sitting in the pews.

That's a strong statement, I know. I meant it to be. And maybe that will mean a few less dollars in the offering plate today and no hearty handshakes for the pastor, but so be it. But at least I have your attention: Yes, even those of us sitting here this morning are becoming unchurched. Here's what I mean by that.

Being a follower of Jesus is supposed to be all-consuming. It is supposed to require a life of discipline, of cross-bearing and self-denial. It is supposed to bring you joy, ultimately, yes, but it is supposed to be hard. Very hard. Most of the people who followed Jesus for the wonderful miracles and wise sayings about living life eventually left and went home when he started talking about crosses and hating your family, and they realized just exactly what was going to be expected of them. He might have had the words of life, as Thomas said, and even abundant life, but that doesn't mean it was an easy, charmed life.

Here it is – the Jesus most of us worship today is an easy, benign, tame Jesus, who's just happy that we've shown up on Sunday. He pats kids on the head and forgives our sins and answers our prayers for help and loves us no matter what; no matter how much, or how little we give him in return. No matter whether we leave our home and our nets and our families to follow right behind him, or follow at a distance when it is convenient for us, or when we need something from him.

And we in church leadership, well, we've made discipleship as non-threatening and undemanding as possible. Numbers are important to us, they tell everyone if we are doing a good job or not, so we make church easy, as undemanding and as easy as we can. We have learned to avoid asking people to make commitments to things, like weekly Bible study, or memorizing scripture, or time-consuming projects and ministries. Even though Jesus talked about money all the time, more than anything else, we try to limit ourselves to a few weeks a

year, and even then, we tread easy – it is our paycheck that’s on the line, after all. In our zeal to make church more inviting, more not-threatening, we have very few expectations of church members; fewer than at any other time in the history of the Church, I suspect.

And here is what we have done: we’ve made Christianity people-centric, not God-centric. It is all about us, not God. It is about the comfort and security of us. The glory of God? Awe? Reverence? Humility and devotion and self-sacrifice and self-discipline? Think back to those two calls to worship I read at the beginning. Now, please don’t misunderstand. I’m not categorically trying to say that we shouldn’t make worship come alive in new ways, but we need to take care in how we do that. In that first call to worship, the one from the Psalms, we are here because God is God and we have no other reasonable response but to bow down and worship God and celebrate the goodness and glory of God. And the other – it is more about us and what we need to get out of this hour, than the Holy God who created all that is, who deserves, and yes, demands our worship.

Matthew begins the story of the transfiguration by saying that it happened six days after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, and six days after Jesus started talking about the cross, and suffering, and truly radical discipleship. He wanted those two things linked. He wanted us to remember that Jesus wasn’t just some public servant or motivational speaker you could become a fan of. Jesus is the Son of God, full of glory, and following him requires commitment. Discipline. Ultimate allegiance – being his follower comes before anything else, and requires nothing less than giving ourselves completely to him to use as he sees fit, to re-make completely in his image. Not if time permits. Not if our other priorities allow it.

Lent begins in three days. Some of you will give something up for Lent. Caffeine, or TV, or sweets. I’m going to challenge you to do more. Do better. Give your *whole* life to God. Become a serious student of the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. Un-tame Jesus, and give your life to him the way you were meant to. Don’t dabble at discipleship, be a radical disciple of the Son of God. It won’t be easy, I can promise you that, but if we all do it together, if we stand together and support and encourage and pray for each other, well, it still won’t be easy, but at least we won’t be alone.

We’re done with Paul now, but don’t forget what he told us: You are the body of Christ, the temple of God. God’s glory resides in us when we gather together. That’s not something to take lightly. There’s nothing casual about it, and if I have the courage, I won’t let you forget it; I’ll expect more of you. God does. And God deserves more.

You are disciples, not just of Jesus of Nazareth, but of the Son of God. We are the Church, not just a friendly neighborhood community, but God’s temple. This Lent, commit yourself to take that more seriously, to give yourself to that life more deeply.