



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – July 5, 2009

Familiar Changes  
Mr. Jonah Bartlett, M.Div.

## **Mark 6:1-13**

*He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them. So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

I have recently found that I am asked a certain question a lot. It is not a question that is unique to me but I think that it is probably something that is asked of every new person entering the ministry, whether in the church or outside it. The question takes a few forms, some words are changed, but it basically comes down to this. Did you always know that you wanted to do this?

The answer, in my case, is "no". There was a long time where I had no actual thought of entering into ministry. The list of occupations that ran through my mind in high school and college and even into graduate school was long and diverse. Teaching,

social work, even acting, the possibilities seemed limitless.

No, I did not always know that I wanted to be in ministry, and if there was ever a time when I felt a sense of certainty about my calling before these recent years it was when I was in elementary school and felt a burning desire to be a superhero.

Now I wasn't exactly clear on how one goes about becoming a superhero. I didn't know any superheroes in my personal life whom I could emulate. My elementary school, as good as it was at teaching me about letters and numbers and the different types of clouds in the sky offered very little in the way of instruction on super speed, or flight, or invulnerability. It was clear that I was going to have to become a superhero all by myself and so I went about it the way I learned from the comic books. At night I watched for falling stars, which I was certain would be crashing spacecrafts, their alien captains all too willing to hand over a power ring to a six-year old earthling boy. In the afternoon I searched under the rocks and around the bushes in my backyard, looking for a spider or any other bug for that matter which looked like it may have been exposed to some form of radioactivity. At mealtimes I consumed inordinate amounts of green vegetables which my mother assured me would assist in my quest. It was a stealthy parental strategy.

Now I never did end up becoming a superhero, but my fascination with them lasted a bit longer. I loved their abilities, teleportation or communication with animals, I loved their adventures, defending the lost city of Atlantis or battling a monster that was determined to consume the sun. I even loved their costumes, masks and capes and gadgets, the whole bag of tricks. But what I really loved was their secret identities.

I loved this notion that the old familiar Joe or Josephine that we all know so well in their perfect ordinariness became, at night or in secret, someone completely extraordinary. Now, pretty much all the superheroes

had secret identities, but the best of them all was Clark Kent. It's amazing what a pair of glasses can do for a guy. At the offices of the Daily Planet, Clark Kent's place of employment, he was just the editor's errand boy, Jimmy Olsen's water cooler pal, and Lois Lane's rookie partner in the field, some farmer's kid from Smallville, Kansas. And he played it up. He was clumsy and naïve, and he repeatedly disappeared when danger reared its head, reappearing when it had all been set aright. No one at the Daily Planet would ever think that Clark Kent could possibly be Superman, faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, so on and so on. No way. He was just Clark Kent. Smallville.

Our New Testament reading this morning from Mark is truly one of the most interesting pieces of the narrative of the life of Jesus that is told in any of the gospels. It is his return home, back to Nazareth, further inland from the Sea of Galilee where he has gathered the disciples. It is his return to the place of what some scholars refer to as his "mystery years", that time between his birth and the beginning of his ministry during which we know he has become a carpenter but know very little else. It is these people whom he encounters at the synagogue that have seen the Jesus of those years, and one might expect that it is these people who then celebrate at his homecoming, listen most carefully as he teaches, stand in the most awe as they watch him lay his hands on the sick and heal them.

But this is not their response. Instead, they are astounded at his teaching. "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. They could not believe in him, they could not believe in the change that had taken place within him and the changes that he was making in the towns and the lands around him. Maybe if it was another prophet, maybe if it was another healer, maybe if it was another teacher. But not Jesus. We know Jesus. Smallville.

And in this dismissal, we are able to see Jesus' frustration. It has become somewhat of a famous scriptural passage. "Prophets are not without honor.

Except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Here the familiar change is not recognized, and without change belief, and without belief, hope.

Of course, we've heard a lot about change and hope recently. They were key phrases in the November elections, were frequently dropped on all the cable news shows. They meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people, a lot of new possibilities, perhaps some new challenges as well. And while change and hope became the standards of political slogans, they have manifested themselves in some very real ways as well.

It is the Fourth of July weekend when we as a country celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the document marking the birth of our nation. The formers of the Declaration recognized the need for change, filing grievances against the colonial power, claiming their freedom as a United States. They saw hope in the penning of a new moral claim, that all people are created equal. It was a hope that time and again motivates new people and new movements, people in uniform abroad, people marching arm-in-arm at home. People who recognize the potential in old and recognizable faces to do new and marvelous things.

Change and hope are also now moving at what some might call a frightening pace in Iran. Here too, after years of silence and fear, protestors take to the streets of the cities, the old, familiar streets, in which they see the possibility of a different future from what they have known or expected all their lives. And these protestors, despite communications blackouts and limited access to phones and computers, have drawn the eyes of the world upon them. Certainly it is in our self-interest to do so as Americans. The outcome of these demonstrations, whatever it may be, will shape our foreign policy in the Middle East for years to come. But perhaps we also look toward Iran because the possibility of change and the tenacity of *their* hope allures us.

Still, as this morning's lesson makes clear, to recognize the hopeful change in Iran or even in the history of our own nation is something very different from recognizing it in our hometown, among our own kin, in our own homes, and within ourselves. We desire to be realists, and I think with good reason. To understand

ourselves, our relationships, the groups and communities that we enter into, means to try and understand our limitations. It is to know that we have struggled at school and at work, it is to know that we haven't always been able to be what we wanted to be in our relationships with our families and our friends, it is to know that in taking the risk to allow a new relationship to be born where we once were hurt is to risk being hurt again. It means that our goals as a community may not always be met and that the work toward those goals may not always be easy. It is to have an understanding about our not-so-secret identities- that we too can be clumsy and naïve, lacking in a nearby phone booth to spin like a whirlwind, change the costume, and make it all go away.

But Jesus' interaction with the people at Nazareth tells a different truth. They do know him well, they are right about that. But they are unable to see that Jesus has changed. Despite the teaching and despite the healing, they are unable to see that. And what they are unable to see is not just this change from the familiar Jesus, Jesus the carpenter, to Jesus the rabbi, healer, Messiah. They are unable to see a very central part of the Christian story. They are unable to see change on a grand scale, and with change, hope. They are unable to see the change from Jesus the carpenter to Jesus the Messiah, from Christ the persecuted and the crucified, to Christ the resurrected and ascended, tied inextricably with the hope for the beloved children of God in the past, present, and in the future.

This is good news. We know ourselves well, we know our relationships well, we know our communities well, but our knowledge can never trump the power of God to change, to reshape, to reform, to make better. It is a belief in change that I see very clearly reflected in the life of this church in the very short time in which I have been fortunate enough to have been with you. It is certainly in the life of worship, as we search to renew ourselves and our spiritual lives and faith each Sunday morning. It is also reflected in some of the decisions made by this congregation, such as the willingness to lend space to Alcoholics Anonymous so that they too can use this sacred space as a place for change and new hope in their personal lives and relationships. It is reflected in the priority given by this church to youth work, to

provide a space for kids to be wholly accepted despite the judgments and categorizations that are so easily defined by our culture. It is reflected in the belief that in the familiarity of the Congregational Church in New Canaan there can always be something new.

Of course today's reading did not just end in this revelation. Jesus' reaction to the disbelief in Nazareth is to send the disciples forward, searching for new hope, shaking the dust from their feet where there is no hope and moving forward again to search once more. Just like it was the mission of the disciples to spread the news of change and hope outside their own roaming group of friends and followers, it is our act of discipleship to share this recognition of change and hope outside the walls of this church. In faith you have found something wonderful here. There is much more to the identity of our world than meets the eye. Proclaim it and rejoice in it. **Amen.**