

When Christians Are Out of the Caves

Mark 1:29-39 | 2/4/2018

If you've ever been on I-75 north of Cincinnati, you've seen it ... or Him, with a capital H. Rising from the ground behind the amphitheater at Monroe, Ohio's Solid Rock Church is a 62-foot resurrection Jesus with his arms raised like he's signaling a touchdown. You can't help but notice. Unfortunately, the statue was struck by lightning and burned to the ground on 2010. It has been replaced by a less athletic version.

A lot of churches are trying to get noticed these days. Congregations all over the United States, including our own, are currently doing all sorts of things to increase their visibility. We're putting portable signs in front of our buildings, updating our Web site and posting sermons on YouTube.

The lust to be seen and heard has not always been the case for the church, as a discovery in 2007 in Rihab, Jordan, reminds us. Archaeologists in that city were working over the remains of St. Georgeous, a Christian church from the third century. They noticed a hollow-sounding spot in the floor. They dug down about two feet and uncovered an old air shaft that opened into a subterranean compartment. Further excavation revealed a series of rooms hollowed out from a cave as well as a tunnel from the cave that leads to a cistern. One room appeared to be a chapel, containing an altar surrounded by stone seats. The archaeologists also found evidence, including some crosses made of iron, that the worship that took place there was Christian worship. An inscription in the floor of the church above the cistern refers to the "70 beloved by God and the divine." Coins and other items found in the rooms indicate that the underground area dates from A.D. 33 to 70.

When this discovery was made public, the lead archaeologist said the cave was now the oldest known Christian church anywhere in the world — possibly the first Christian church. He speculated that it was created by Christians who fled from Jerusalem to Jordan to escape Roman persecution in the first century A.D. He thinks the inscription refers to 70 followers of Jesus who took refuge in the underground quarters.

The persecution of Christians in the first century, coupled with what we know of the persecution of Christians in some parts of the world today, tell us that visibility has not always been high on the church's list of priorities. In fact, in some times and places, invisibility has been the order of the day.

Our reading from Mark is from a time of *visibility*. It's from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and he's quite open and public with his work. He's in the home of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum, where, when evening comes, the many people from the town gather around the door. There, in that public and visible place, Jesus heals the sick and casts demons out of the possessed. And, as the reading continues, Jesus and the disciples move on to the neighboring town of Galilee to continue the public proclamation of the gospel.

But if we were to continue reading in Mark's gospel, we would not go far before finding that visibility soon gets Jesus into trouble. Our reading is from chapter 1. In chapter 3 we find this verse: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against [Jesus], how to destroy him" (Mark 3:6). There it is. Jesus' public ministry has barely begun, and already people in authority are plotting to bring him down. The very next verse tells us that Jesus departs from the synagogue and heads instead to the Sea of Galilee, where he continues his work with the crowds. But already he has had to start avoiding certain public arenas.

Thus we can see that from the very beginning of Christianity, periods of visibility and invisibility, *times of openness and hiddenness, proclamation on the streets and prayer underground, have alternated with one another and sometimes even coexisted*. Remember, even in today's gospel reading, Jesus goes off by himself, leaving the disciples to search for him.

If we think about it, we're Christians today not only because someone openly proclaimed the faith to us, but also because the faith was kept alive through worship in quiet venues like the catacombs, in secret meetings in

private homes, in low-profile gatherings in hidden groves and subterranean meeting places. *Through openness when possible and secrecy when necessary, the faith was kept alive and was passed on.*

There's no question that there are places in the world today where the church does have to meet in secrecy in order to survive. But that's certainly not true here in our country. We're living in a time where visibility is limited only by our inventiveness in getting the word out.

Ironically, while nobody would prefer that we live in an era when our faith, for reasons of safety, would need to be invisible, the "visible" eras have their problems, too. One of them is that when no one is threatening our faith, *it's easy to become lackadaisical about it.* When we don't have to meet surreptitiously, when going to church is as acceptable an activity as going to the movies, it's easy to take it for granted. One of the ironies about persecution is that it tends to fire up enthusiasm for the very thing the persecutors are trying to stamp out. It's quite possible that one reason that many denominations are experiencing membership loss is because nobody is trying to eliminate them! We may assume that because the faith is out in the open, somebody else will take care of passing it along. Yet the fact remains that most people who come into the faith do so not because they went out looking for it, but because somebody told them about it.

The other problem with periods when Christianity is above ground is that *it's usually competing with other faiths that are also enjoying religious freedom.*

Thus, our job as Christian witnesses in highly visible periods is not simply to tell people about Christianity. We need to demonstrate with our actions, supported by our words, why following Jesus is the right course to choose from the smorgasbord of religious options out there.

How would you answer the question, "When did I last invite someone to come with me to church?" If the answer to that is, "A long time," or "Never," then we should consider whether we really have a desire to share the faith. That's not something to beat ourselves up about — desire cannot be forced — but if we don't have it, then we need to rely on a sense of *obligation*. Jesus told his followers to go into the world and make disciples. Disregarding that because we have no appetite or inclination for it is not an act of faithfulness. We can at least invite someone else to come with us to where we find spiritual nourishment so that they can find it for themselves.

Finally, there's the problem of what people *do* see when our faith is visible. Alan Kimber, pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Lodi, California, puts it this way: When those outside the church look at us/you, what do they see?

- Maybe nothing, i.e., we are invisible when we should be visible;
- Maybe a lot of hype but not much substance;
- Maybe a focus only on self, introspection that leads to a disregard of others;
- Maybe a defense of the institution, structure, doctrine or style of worship instead of compassion for those beyond the system;
- Maybe they see the face of Jesus in compassion, concern and openness, taking the risk of welcoming and including others unconditionally.

In the first-world countries, Christianity is currently enjoying a period of visibility. Yet with so much else also on the visual horizon, sometimes it takes someone who's committed to Christ to point Christianity out to someone else as a true gem among the costume jewelry society offers today.

When Christians are out of their caves and into the culture, every one of them — all of us — should be a person doing the pointing.

Pastor Keith