

Sermon: Salted with Fire

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50**

Not only are we picking up exactly where we left off last week, but we also find ourselves in the center of Mark's Gospel, where things are beginning to change for Jesus and his disciples. Our translation includes some interesting details that a quick reading might easily overlook, but it's worth noting that these are the last words Jesus speaks in Galilee. Everything now begins to move toward Jerusalem and the Cross.

The readings from Numbers and Mark's Gospel are both concerned with those expressions of God's power – prophesying, casting out demons – that occur outside the bounds of formal leadership and authority; insiders vs. outsiders; Us vs. Them.

In Numbers, 'the rabble' had a 'strong craving' and the Israelites in general began to complain about the food available to them in their desert wanderings. They remember the food they used to eat in Egypt 'for nothing,' forgetting that they were slaves at the time. The good old days might not have been exactly the way they remembered them, but the manna provided by God had become bland – their food was unseasoned and boring, so their thoughts wandered back to a better time, gastronomically speaking.

Their complaining annoyed both God and Moses, and Moses said to the Lord, 'Why me? Kill me now; I can't do this thing alone!' And God said, 'Delegate.' Moses did, and that led to the situation with Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp and Joshua wanting to stop them. When Moses said, 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets,' he meant all the Israelites; not just him, and not just the seventy elders, who only did it once.

In the parallel Gospel reading, John, one of the sons of Zebedee, tells Jesus that 'someone' – literally a 'strange exorcist' – had been casting out demons in Jesus' name and that they tried to stop him, saying 'he was not following *us*' rather than Jesus. Maybe the disciples have forgotten their origins too.

But Jesus, like Moses, said that was fine, because ‘whoever is not against us is for us.’ You can be a non-follower of Jesus and if you’re not working against him, then you are, by default, for him. To not take a side is to take a side nonetheless.

Now, if you had followed along in your pew Bible while I was reading from Mark, you might have noticed that there are no verses 44 and 46. The traditional verse numbering came from a sketchy and inferior source called the *Textus receptus*. That manuscript and a few others repeat what we have as verse 48 after each ‘go to hell’ saying, whereas the best and most reliable sources do not, so our modern translations simply omit them, leaving the gaps as a reminder.

Also notice how chatty Jesus is here. There are few, if any, other places in Mark where Jesus says so much all at once. And in this section, he is very much in Old Testament mode, by which I mean that Jesus talks about stumbling blocks, Gehenna, and salt, things that are rooted deeply in the Scripture Jesus knew.

Let’s start with Gehenna, the unquenchable fire. Modern-day Christians have had it drilled into their collective heads that Hell – with a capital H – is a real place and we’re all going to end up there unless we shape up. In fact, in Jesus’ time, it *was* a real place, about ten kilometers southwest of Jerusalem, in the Hinnom Valley. For a long time, Gehenna served as the garbage dump of Jerusalem, where fires burned day and night to consume all the junk coming out of the city every day. You could see the smoke rising into the sky from the Temple. Jesus uses it as a metaphor to remind people that they didn’t want to end up there, just because they sinned. It was real, but it was avoidable.

Stumbling blocks and salt are ambiguous images in Scripture.

In the Book of Job, *ha-satan* was a member of God’s heavenly council who walked the earth and reported back to God all that he saw regarding sin. His name meant *the accuser* or *the adversary*, and he wasn’t yet a symbol of evil. He had one job to do and he did it well.

Over time, Elaine Pagels writes, Satan, as he was now known, became the one, authorized by God, who blocked or opposed human plans and desires.¹ Now, I said this was ambiguous. Pagels quotes a scholar named Neil Forsyth, who said, ‘If the path is bad, an obstruction is good.’² So, it may be that God sent *ha-satan* to protect a sinner from worse harm. The stumbling block made you stop, re-evaluate, and maybe repent.

Jesus refers to stumbling blocks in a different way. For him, a stumbling block means something that might entice you to sin, and we're the ones doing the obstructing. Those who believe in him, who put their faith and trust in him, are on the good path. Gehenna is the next stop for anyone who blocks that path.

Salt is another ambiguous image. In the old days, before Jesus' time, salt was often added to one's grain offering at the Temple. Because it adds flavor to food, salt was and still is, a sign of hospitality; in colonial America, it made a great housewarming gift. Salt is so good, we use it to describe those whom we most esteem: that so-and-so is 'the salt of the earth.'

When the Romans conquered Carthage, legend says they destroyed the city and salted the fields, destroying that season's crops. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Skeptics take things with a grain of salt.

Salt is both a blessing and a curse, and Mark is a genius for using it as such here.

Jesus' followers, he says, will be tested by a purifying fire in the same way salt can be sprinkled everywhere indiscriminately: what is worthless will burn away; what is good will survive. It's a trial and it applies to every disciple. Mark's point, and Jesus' goal, was for the disciples to avoid causing sin, to protect themselves against corruption, and to live in peace within the community.

In Mark's context, Israel was at war with the Romans, and losing. At the same time, a variety of religious, social, and political factions were at war with each other. Depending on what you were up to, trust was often in short supply. Pagels writes that 'Satan is not the distant enemy but the intimate enemy'³ – a trusted colleague, a close associate, your brother. When Jesus preached that anyone who did the will of God was his family, that resonated with those who heard it. They could trust God.

When Jesus said, 'For everyone *will be* salted with fire,' do you think he meant now, or later, and who will do the salting? Probably both and probably God.

He may not have meant it literally when he said we should cut off our hand if it causes us to stumble, or to cut off a foot or poke out an eye. Imagine if he had said, 'If you lose your cable signal, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God without Netflix than to have cable access and be thrown into hell.'

The things we worry about today are similar to and as significant as the issues that Jesus and Mark had to contend with.

If you only look at Facebook, or if you only get your news from your ex-con brother-in-law from Peoria, or only from your friends in Florida, you're going to get a skewed view of what's what in the world. If you limit your Facebook time to cat videos, then the world will seem like a pretty happy place. But if you focus only on congressional hearings, then for you, the world is on fire and it becomes hard to tell who is Us and who is Them.

It seems to me that with all the turmoil in the world today, maybe people have forgotten what God has done for them in the past, or perhaps they no longer see God at work in the world at all. Maybe we long for the food we used to get for nothing in our personal, metaphorical Egypt. It could be that we're overwhelmed by all the stumbling blocks we see in our path, not knowing which one is meant to protect or to harm, and that confusion stops us from moving forward.

In our recent readings from Mark, we have heard the disciples argue about who was the greatest; we have learned about the importance of God's messengers – how they could be anyone, even a child; and today Jesus challenged us not to obstruct any who are on the good path which leads to God's kingdom; and to stay salty, so to speak.

Jesus challenged us to read the signs of the times and decide for ourselves who is 'for us' and who has the spirit of the Lord upon them. Jesus also says it's okay to act in his name because when you do, you're showing yourself to be for *him*, and he promises a reward in heaven to all who show kindness to his followers.

Amen.

¹ Pagels, Elaine H. *The Origin of Satan*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

² Ibid, 40.

³ Ibid, 49.