

B Lectionary 4 1.28.24

Mark 1:21-28

Focus Statement: Jesus cares about all our problems

I've said this a bunch already this year, but Mark moves fast. We are just twenty verses in, and Jesus has already been baptized, been tempted in the wilderness, has four disciples, and is performing his first miracle. And this story of Jesus healing the man with a demonic spirit really leans into the speed at which Mark's Gospel unfolds. "They went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue." "And immediately in the synagogue there was a man with an unclean spirit." "Jesus rebuked him...and the unclean spirit came out of him." "And immediately" –the translation says "at once," but the Greek is the same immediately–"and immediately his fame spread everywhere." This passage happens so fast.

Fast and with authority. That's something else that struck me as I was thinking about the text this morning. Jesus gave them "A new teaching–with authority." What was it about this teaching that felt so new, so fresh, so authoritative? Because it wasn't the teaching itself. We know from other places in Mark, from the rest of the Gospels, that Jesus wasn't bringing anything particularly new. He was pulling the people's attention back to the same solid truths that God had been teaching God's people since before time began. That they were beloved, created in God's own image and called not just good but very good. That they were created for relationship with God and with each other. How to care for each other, especially those most in need. How to practice justice, mercy, hospitality, an expansive welcome. How to lift up all voices. These are all things Jesus taught, but they weren't new. These were things we saw God calling God's people to in our summer journeying through

Genesis and Exodus. Abraham was blessed so that through him all the nations would be blessed. Moses led God's people from slavery to freedom, and in doing so created of them a community meant to provide freedom to all people. In a time of male-only leadership, the Judges gave us Deborah and Jael, two powerful women without whom God's people would not have survived. These weren't new teachings. They were told in fresh ways through Jesus, but there was nothing particularly new about them. They were the promises on which God built the foundations of the world.

What was new was the authority with which they were delivered. Jesus taught not like the scribes, not even like one of the prophets of old, but with the power and authority of God's own Son. Mary and I were talking at Bible chat a few weeks ago about both this passage and the one last week, where Jesus convinced four men to give up their livelihoods, literally leave their father sitting in their boat, and follow Jesus. What power must they have heard in Jesus' voice to take a leap of faith like that one, in the simple words of "Follow me." "I bet he spoke softly," Mary remarked. I'd never thought about the sound of Jesus' voice before, but once Mary said it, the image caught me. Because when I think of the most authoritative people in my life, the people who have spoke to me with wisdom, strength, and guidance, it's rarely been the loud ones. Maybe it's my personality, I'm not much for yelling, but I tend to have trouble trusting the loudest voices in a room. You know those voices, the ones who demand your attention, who fill a space with words and bluster, about all the things that they and only they can do. Too much of our culture these days seems filled with those voices, who put themselves forward by silencing others.

And Jesus' voice seems different than that, and different in ways that we see in this text. This week, after gathering four disciples with nothing more than the command to follow, Jesus returned to Capernaum. Get used to Capernaum, because we'll be coming here often. It was Simon and Andrew's hometown, and it became Jesus' homebase for the rest of his Galilean mission. So they came to Capernaum and, like any good Jew would do, when the Sabbath came, they went to the synagogue. And, again as was common practice when a traveling rabbi came to town, Jesus was asked by the synagogue to teach. This is not unlike my having Pastor Sprang preach last week, it's good to have people hear different ideas and perspectives on these texts, and it's nice for a preacher to be preached to on occasion. And he was clearly a good preacher, since right at the beginning the people started to notice that "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." But teaching "as one having authority" is different from having authority. And what happened next is where I think we see Jesus' real authority demonstrated. Because immediately "there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit." And remember what we talked about from Mark earlier, that Jesus goes through the whole Gospel on a time crunch. Jesus was a man on a mission, and every move and choice and decision was laser focused on reaching that goal. Nothing would distract him, nothing would get him off course.

Nothing, that is, until a man in need presented himself in the middle of the synagogue. And here's something else I realized, that I'd never thought about until I was reflecting on the text this week. It doesn't tell us that the man with the unclean spirit was making any kind of a fuss. Normally in these exorcism stories, the text describes the man shaking, yelling, convulsing, even ripping off his clothes and breaking chains. This text doesn't have that.

Maybe he was doing all those things and interrupting the teaching, I'd always assumed that, but it doesn't tell us that directly. This man could have been sitting quietly in Jesus' midst, wracked with a spirit that no one else could see.

Whatever the man was or wasn't doing, what Jesus did next is clear. Jesus, who, remember, was laser focused on this mission of proclaiming as quickly as possible to as many people as possible, the good news of God, this promise we heard last week that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand." That Jesus, in the middle of delivering that message to a room full of people in rapt attention, turned his focus to a single man with a single problem.

And here's the other crazy thing, that spirit knew Jesus. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth," that spirit proclaimed. Which, that in and of itself isn't an impressive claim, where he was from was common knowledge. It was the next statement that was the kicker, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God." This claim sets up for us the cosmic nature of this interaction. Since the time the Spirit descended upon Jesus and drove him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, we have seen Jesus' ministry as this cosmic battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil. This is the story of Jesus silencing those forces, casting them away with no more than a word.

Dear people of God, what I get from this story is how Jesus' authority is found not in his ability to gather a crowd, but in his care for the people in that crowd. As individuals. In a room full of people hanging on his every word, Jesus paused to care for the one person with

one particular need. And it was in that action that the crowd saw how Jesus taught not simply as one with authority, but in fact with the authority that came not from his words but from how he lived them out. With the care and compassion to pay attention to individual needs, for care and compassion, justice and mercy, are where true authority comes.

Dear people of God, this is a story of a God who cares about us, yes, but also about you. Also about what you bring, what you hold, what you need. This is about a God who sees us as individuals, each a part of God's own image, and who through Jesus came to care, and heal, and nurture our own hearts, so that we, each of us, who we are, as we are, know that we are God's beloved now.

This is a story about how God loves us, and it is also a story about how we can love one another. About how best to live out the authority God gives us in our baptism, to be a part of the sharing of the Good News of Jesus and the nearness of the kingdom of God. God's authority comes in caring. In telling the story, yes, but not in a soapbox-y, look at me, I have all the answers sort of a way. But through love, through grace, through listening to someone's needs and meeting them where we're at. So often I think it's easy to feel like our actions are not enough, like what can we possibly do. But there's a line in the hymn we're about to sing that gets me every time, about how through our actions we can, like Jesus, share God's love one person at a time, and through those simple actions, reveal the kingdom. The line reads, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul" – though, here I would insert both those guys were real screw ups at times, and did good

work for God despite that, but anyway, the song- "You can share the love of Jesus, and say he died for all."

Dear people of God, you are loved by God. What you bring, your needs, hurts, fears, and cares, those things that feel big to you, but seem insignificant in the face of a hurting world, those things are not too small for God. God cares about those things because God cares about you. And, the things you bring to others, the love, the sharing, the giving of yourself, those actions too are not too insignificant to matter in the bringing of the kingdom. Jesus stopped preaching to a roomful of people to heal one man. Each and every one of us matters to God. Amen.