

Sermon Text – Sunday January 28, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 2nd Reading: I Corinthians 8:1-13
Scripture for Message: Mark 1:21-28 “Everything”**

We will be skipping around in Mark’s Gospel for a few weeks, but I want to speak about what Mark writes in his Gospel prior to what we have read this morning, because it supplies context. One thing to note is that for Mark, everything happens expediently – he jumps from one occurrence in the life of Jesus to the next prefacing each event with “immediately” or “as soon as” I guess Mark was excited about getting the message across and didn’t see the point in drawing things out. Preceding the events we read about this morning, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River – as Jesus was coming out of the water the Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” In verse 12 we can read that “at once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan.” Mark does not give us any information about the outcome of Jesus’ encounter with Satan. But we can surmise as we read further in Mark’s Gospel that his forty days in the wilderness began the dismantling of Satan’s kingdom and that each encounter with demonic forces further illustrates Jesus authority over those forces.

These points are important for us to remember when we read this story about Jesus’ encounter with the “unclean” Spirit in the Synagogue. Jesus begins his ministry in Capernaum, a village you will hear more about, I am sure. This event takes place at the very beginning of his ministry, on the Sabbath in the Synagogue where Jesus came to teach and proclaim his message from God. The people were astounded at his teaching, he taught as one having authority.

Recall what we read from Deuteronomy this morning. In that reading we heard Moses comforting the people of Israel with these words, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” Moses was giving the people these instructions to strengthen their courage as they were about to enter the land God had promised. Moses knew he would not be with them much longer, but he also knew that God’s presence would remain with them, and they needed encouragement. Moses tells the people that this “new” prophet would speak the true word of God, words put in the prophets mouth by God. Moses warns the people that those who choose to ignore or disobey the words of the prophet are in danger of divine judgment.

Jesus teaches as one with authority – Jesus is a “new” Moses. Not since Moses had anyone shown such intimate knowledge of God and God’s will. Even in the very beginning days of his ministry Jesus proves knowledge of God through his teaching and he proves authority over even the unclean spirits. His fame spread throughout the region of Galilee.

Mark tells us that the people are amazed at Jesus teaching, but we can read throughout Mark’s Gospel that although amazed, very few saw Jesus for who he was – the Holy One of God. The demons however knew Jesus – “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Because Jesus might not have been ready for that word to spread, he silences the demon, “Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus, through the power of God’s goodness, challenges even frighten all instances of evil. The demon can do nothing but obey Jesus’ command and leaves crying out in a loud voice. Jesus is the prophet – those who disobey the words of the prophet are in danger of divine judgment.

At Jesus’ baptism he is blessed with the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, sent from above – a clean spirit I guess would be what you could call it. Contrast that with the “unclean” spirit Jesus’ encounters in the synagogue. Two opposing forces but Jesus is stronger, Jesus has the authority from the Father in heaven. Here is the first of Mark’s recorded battles between Jesus’ and unclean spirits or demons. We might interpret this unclean spirit as being within someone who was ‘ritually’ impure. It was sacrilege for someone ritually impure to enter the synagogue without cleansing themselves. Jesus would have confronted this “spirit” because he fully obeyed Torah law and rituals.

We should also explore this unclean spirit’s response to Jesus. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I wonder if, this might be Mark’s way to set the stage for this ultimate battle between Jesus and Satan which culminates with Jesus resurrection from the grave. The answer to that question is EVERYTHING. Jesus came into the world to set up God’s kingdom on earth. God’s kingdom challenges and destroys evil. Jesus came to free those imprisoned, God intends to free all who are imprisoned by evil.

The statement made by this spirit, “Have you come to destroy us?” is as much a declaration of fact as it is a question of Jesus’ intent. Yes, Jesus has come to exercise authority over unclean spirits – that is illustrated in much of Mark’s Gospel. Satan’s kingdom has no power over Jesus’ authority. Jesus is sent to destroy Satan’s kingdom and replace it with the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The place and time of this encounter is important for us to explore as well. This occurred on the Sabbath in the Synagogue. This is a sacred space in time and

in a sacred place. The people were astonished that Jesus' teaching was "not as the scribes" Jesus was teaching as someone with authority, and this was new for them. They were amazed that in the middle of the synagogue, "just then" came a man with an unclean spirit. This was an astonishing thing that was happening in their synagogue and on a sabbath. This was not supposed to happen – they kept on asking each other "What is this?" what is going on here!

I suppose that might be our response as well. We expect our Sunday worship "church" time to be clean and free from surprises or chaos. We expect no disruptions, people should conduct themselves with decorum for this is God's house. How would we react to this scene playing out in real time in our sanctuary? What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? EVERYTHING. Jesus' presence is our strength, Jesus' authority is the power we have to overcome whatever disruptions we might face. How do we draw from that power and authority? We can call on the name of the Holy One of God – Jesus. Through faith and prayer, we defeat the disruptive forces surrounding us.

It's interesting to me that Jesus' teachings amazed the people, yet they did not come to know his true identity – the demon's knew him his followers did not, at least not yet. How often do Jesus' teachings and miracles amaze us but yet do not enable us to fully place our trust and faith in Him? Jesus had stepped into this synagogue and began to teach something new, in a powerful way with authority. Jesus' encounter with this unclean spirit was disruptive, but he himself was disruptive as well when he stepped out of the usual patterns of preaching and teaching.

Is the church capable of amazing people in the same manner? Are we capable of surprise when we worship or would we rather things stay familiar with no disruptions or annoyances? How would we meet unclean spirits in our midst – confrontation or avoidance? I have read from a commentary on this passage, "We need not fear the annoying, disruptive, unclean who enter our congregation's space, seeking to be near Christ, for we are called to rely on Christ's power to join us together in worship and work."¹ I interpret this as calling on the church to confront evil with the words Jesus used and not turn our back or try to gloss over the evil that exists in our world. I also interpret this as a call to accept those who, although their past may have us consider them 'unclean', are trying to draw near Christ and find a home where they can be 'free' from the oppression of evil.

Christians encounter evil on a personal level every day of their lives. Not necessarily in big ways but often in little ways, violent anger, sexist or racist remarks and jokes, or bullying. It exists in our workplaces, in our schools, even in

¹ Erin Dufault-Hunter. "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Commentary 2: Connecting the reading with the World, Mark 1:21-28" *Connections Year B, Vol 1*. Westminster John Knox. 2020. p.228

this congregation. It exists when we do not examine the existence of barriers to worship for Christians who are not like us. We have Christ's power that enables us to confront evil – not turn our backs on it. Notice Jesus' did not banish the man but did exorcise the unclean spirit, it is the evil we resist not the person.

In addition, we can respond to the evil that surrounds us as a community of faith. We do this through prayer, through speaking up. Jesus confronted evil with his words, he healed and comforted with his words. We have the knowledge of scripture to inform us and can draw on that knowledge to help us confront evil. But – listen to the warnings of Paul, take care that we do not become stumbling blocks to the weak. We need wisdom to handle these situations with care, wisdom to confront evil effectively. And, here's the thing – wisdom is not primarily about having information or knowing things about God, it includes embodied responses to material realities. Jesus confronted with words, he stepped in and acted when action was needed.

When the unclean spirits in our world ask – what have you to do with us? Our response should be as Jesus' responded – “Be silent, unclean spirit”. Because we, as Christians and members of the body of Christ, have everything to do with the evil that exists in our world. Just as Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free – it is the mission of the church, this church and all Christians to fulfill Jesus' mission. It is the Christian mission to confront evil wherever it exists in the world and proclaim Christ's power and authority.