

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
January 28, 2018

Mark 1: 21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Confident Teaching

This week I learned an interesting fact: in the sixteen chapters of Mark's gospel, Mark's telling of the story of Jesus, the word translated "immediately" is used 46 times - so often in fact that translators often substitute "then" or "at once" to soften the repetition. Repetition of this word is Mark's way of telling us that Jesus is a man of action: one who moves quickly from place to place, encounter to encounter, a man on a mission.

No sooner is a full grown Jesus baptized, the way the gospel begins than he moves from the river Jordan to the Sea of Galilee to call disciples from their nets (the passage Rosemary MacKay preached on last Sunday). No sooner has Jesus called disciples than he goes from the fishing and calling place to the teaching place, the place of security and tradition known as the temple. This is the way the gospel begins, with swift, decisive action -- with a sense that Jesus is spirit-led to do these things and there is no time to waste in what Jesus has come to earth to do.

As Eugene Peterson translates it: "Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching – so forthright, so confident – Not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars." So the man who comes into the temple is doing religion *differently* -- and people take notice.

But suddenly there is an interruption -- because a person understood in Jesus time to be disturbed by demons (clearly someone who suffered from some form of mental illness) enters the temple. Now any kind of illness, mental illness included, would have made this man impure, unfit for being in that place. But there he is, and what follows is a kind of confrontation, a showdown if you will. Jesus, possessed by the Spirit of God, is confronted by a man possessed by the demonic.

Again, Eugene Peterson's telling: "*Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, Jesus was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out,*

“What business do you have with us, Jesus, Nazarene? I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!” Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him! The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly – and got out.”

Again, I want to emphasize this, because Mark does: this is all part of the beginning, Mark’s beginning of the story of Jesus Christ. Jesus baptism first shows Jesus is the real deal. His then calling disciples shows he cannot do it all alone. Now Mark is showing Jesus *power*. Here is one who channels the very power of God, who is, then, a force to be reckoned with.

A force to be reckoned with because there is more going on here than teaching and healing. To the religions scholars of Jesus day, people were understood to be like a cup, a vessel, and the point of religious teaching was to fill it up. The church has had this idea in the past too. Tell the youth about the traditions of the church, the bible, what it says, and the sacraments, what they are, and they will have what they need. But Jesus teaching, so forthright and so confident, is different. It’s not as much about information as *transformation*. It puts word and deed together...and it messes with the status quo. What business do you have with us, Jesus the man possessed says, as if he knows that Jesus has the power to God to free people from all that binds them.

Recently I came across a story told by an urban pastor about a man coming to the church door. He buzzed the buzzer, came into the church office and let the office staff know that he wanted a blessing. The pastor felt confused. Usually people ask to “speak to the pastor” but they don’t say exactly why, or they say, “I need some help”. When he met the man, he was not what the pastor expected. He was neatly dressed, clean shaven, late twenties. There was an air of dignity about him, none of the usual signs of “been on the street” as we say. The pastor invited him in to his office, asking if he’d like to talk a while. No, the man said. I just need a blessing today. When the pastor pressed a bit more, the man said something about having “a devil on his back” and expressed the idea that a blessing would help him be rid of it.

Sensing that the man meant what he said, the pastor asked the man’s name -- “Andy” and asking Andy to kneel on the carpet while he put his hand on his head he prayed a prayer that was more a traditional prayer than a classic blessing, but he prayed with thanksgiving for God’s presence in Andy’s life and that God would take away this “devil” that was keeping Andy from being the person he wanted to be. When the prayer was over, Andy stood up, smiled and went on his way. The sense you got from the story, the way it was told was that Andy may have believed the pastors words had more power than the pastor himself did. All Andy wanted, all he really *needed*, was a blessing.

Sometimes, as your pastor, I wonder what would happen if more of us had that sense, not about me and the efficacy of my prayers, but that sense of God and the power of God to bring us to a new place. The irony of course of our scripture today is

that this outsider, the man possessed recognizes Jesus power more than the average person sitting in the pews.

Years ago, back in the day when people wore hats to church the poet Annie Dillard famously remarked

Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church: we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; They should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."
(Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p, 40-41)

Have we a domesticated religion, one that says little about the power of God loose in the world and in our lives? Has there been healing here in this place? Have our lives been transformed? Have we found in Jesus release from the things that bind us? Our passage today has questions to ask us.

Now, she says, putting on her best pastoral voice, I want to say something about our church surveys, the very thing our leadership retreat is going to work with as we try to discern our way forward here at The Church of the Pilgrimage. For those of you who are newer to the church, and perhaps have not seen a survey or filled one out, the surveys were in effect trying to see what people value most about our congregation, our common life, as it presently is and where people feel our best efforts might be in serving God as we move forward. The results as I said are going to be reflected upon in a week's time. But I should tell you this: there was space at the end for people to offer their thoughts and (shocking!) people said some very different things. A few said no more politics from the pulpit, thank you very much. Others said I want to continue to hear sermons that engage with the issues of our day. And a few others wrote "Don't change anything. The church is great as it is." It should be a lot of fun to make sense of the surveys, don't you think?

But the point I want to make here is simply that we come to church for many reasons. Some of us have deep personal struggles and challenges, and we come looking for comfort. Some of us are perplexed by our world and we come seeking perspective. Some of us are --dare I say it? -- restless and maybe a little bored or lost and we want inspiration and a place to give our gifts and make a difference. But we all of us are called to listen to the words of the bible. Not worship the bible, as Peter Gomes admonishes, but *listen to it*, and find where it *addresses us*. And today, good friends, the gospel is reminding us that Jesus did not come to keep things the same. Jesus came to challenge the demonic, to confront complacency, to wake people up to the coming of God's kingdom here and now.

Last week, before I left for our trip out west, someone expressed to me that they found it hard to sing “We Shall Overcome” on the Martin Luther King weekend because though a verse proclaims, “we are not afraid” they felt afraid, very afraid. I’ve been thinking of that ever since. It makes me think of two things: The No Place for Hate T shirts that said, “The opposite of love is not hate but indifference.” So we can have times of fear, but indifference – no. The second thing was what Martin Luther King Jr said himself, that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. At the rally the next day, that Martin Luther King Monday, I went to the rally and in an aside to me Reverend Ed Hardy said that his black friends at Messiah Baptist church often say that they feel sorry for white people sometimes, because they don’t know much about obstacles, and overcoming obstacles. See, we sing ‘We are not afraid’ *together*. Individually you may be afraid. But when we come together, it is different. The power of God flows through our hands as we join them and sing We shall overcome. The song looks forward, but it is meant to strengthen us for the here and now.

Today we have our budget meeting. I hope you won’t see it as ho hum. Budgets are what help us be the church, doing God’s work in our time and place. But I also have this hope: that as we move forward, as we continue in our pilgrimage we will take the power of God seriously, we will take being called to ministry together seriously, we will believe that where we are timid or afraid God can enter in and change that. Mostly I hope we will believe that the word of God is powerful, and that it can change us.

I also hope this passage, and the story of Andy and Annie Dillard leave us today feeling perhaps a little wistful ...and curious. What if we were truly open to this Jesus who in Mark bursts upon the scene? What if even our tried and true comfortable way of being religious was up for grabs and this was a good thing?

Listen to the way our story today ends, and I am using Eugene Peterson’s translation once again. “Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!” News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.” (*Eugene Peterson, The Message*)

What if our church was known as a place that was always striving to find and follow that teaching, a teaching that does what it says, a teaching that is forthright and confident? What if we here in this place believed, truly believed that we and our world will be changed by the fiercely urgent power of God?

Amen.