

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
28 January 2024

Mark 1:21-28

Welcome to our 2024 Annual Meeting. It is strange to think that this church is only 55 years old. For five and a half decades, we have gathered on this campus to tell and retell the stories of our salvation, to live our lives in community, to raise our children together, and to pray to a common God who loves us and cares for us. The dream that begun in a champions home all those years ago has come to maturity. And here we are, gathered in this place once again to share another meal of Word and Sacrament with friends and family. Today, as we enjoy the beautiful music and talk about the word of God in the Gospel of Mark, let us remember those original founders and let us give thanks to God for their commitment and love, their resilience and patience, and their hope in a God who is much bigger than anyone of us can imagine.

To celebrate our birthday, let us do today what we have done for 55 years. Let us enter God's story in Mark. Today we hear that Jesus and at least four of his new apostles visit the town of Capernaum, teach in the synagogue, and exorcise or heal a man possessed by an evil spirit. We have three components to this short passage: two different stories and a brief conclusion, and each of these components shares the word "Immediately," which ties them together.

The first story starts when the group arrives in Capernaum. Immediately, the Holy One of God, enters the holy place of worship, on the holy day of the week and begins to teach. Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught, he simply tells us that (a) He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, (b) he taught, (c) everyone was astounded at his teaching. The conclusion of this first story is that the people saw Jesus as one who teaches with authority and not like the scribes. Right from the start, the author gives us a polemic by placing Jesus on one side and the teachers of the day on the other. The scribes were responsible for copying, studying, interpreting, and teaching the Torah. They were the teachers of the law, the intellectuals of the day. Their teaching was filled with the wisdom of others, as it was their job to interpret the Law in light of the teachings of the great Rabbis of history. They spent many years pouring over the ancient writings of those teachers and they sought to help people understand and obey those teachings. But Jesus taught as one "having his own authority." He was not quoting anyone, he was not interested in the known orthodoxy of the day, his fresh views on Scripture had the familiarity of the expert, but they had a power (an authority) they had not heard

before. People are enraptured by this teaching and ask themselves, “What is this? A new teaching?” This could mean the teaching was new or the style was new, but in either case, they felt moved to the core.

The second story also has the same structure as the first. It starts with the word “immediately,” translated in our passage as “just then.” Immediately, “there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.” During the holiest day of the week, in the holy place of God, while the Holy One of God is teaching, an unholy presence shouts, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” This man’s presence in this place is very puzzling and his words are even more puzzling. He calls himself “us,” perhaps indicating that he was possessed by more than one spirit. I wonder why he is here, in church of all places. Why enter enemy territory? Is he checking out the competition? Perhaps the man is struggling with his inner nature and enters the Synagogue as a courageous act of rebellion against the forces that possess him! We don’t know, but we hear that immediately he recognizes Jesus to be a threat to the evil that possesses him. He shouts, “Have you come to destroy us?” While Jesus remains a mystery to everyone else who wonder who he is, the man shouts, “I know who you are.” In the Gospel of Mark the first two voices to acknowledge Jesus’ identity are God (scene at Baptism, “You are my Son...”) and this evil spirit, “You are the Holy One of God.”

The passage continues. Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” Then, although the spirits are commanded to be silent, they convulse the man and make quite a bit of noise as they left him. Those present see this act of exorcism also as part of the teaching. They exclaim for the second time, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” We see the same structure in both stories: Immediately he entered the synagogue (story one,) and immediately a possessed man challenged him (story two). Then he taught (story one,) and then he healed the man (story two.) Everyone is astounded and contrast him to the scribes (story one,) and everyone is astounded and contrast him to evil spirits (story two.)

The passage then ends with a conclusion that also starts with the word “Immediately.” In our passage translated as “At once.” The conclusion is that his fame began to spread throughout Galilee. Mark places Jesus at the opposite side of powerful enemies from the very start of his public ministry. He stands in opposition to the known orthodoxy of the day. He stands in opposition to all evil forces that keep humanity bound. And there are echoes of danger from the very beginning of Mark. These forces will gather momentum throughout the book as they launch a full attack on Jesus. Each of these confrontations remind us of the crucifixion, the place where the enemies seem to get their final victory, only to be

forever defeated by the Son of God. But Mark is also anticipating a final apocalyptic battle between the Son of God and the evil forces of the world. This passage tells us of a struggle in real time, but it also points to the struggle and victory of the cross, and beyond, to the final struggle and victory of Christ at the end of days. And Mark does this throughout his entire book, rushing from “immediately” to “immediately” to get to Jesus’ victory on the cross, the destination place of his narrative. But there is a practical conclusion through it all. Jesus will return soon. All our struggles are temporary. When he returns, he will right all the wrongs. We who endure in faith will join his glorious victory. For a poor and small church like Mark’s, which is undergoing serious persecution, this is good news, indeed! Jesus wins at the end, and they will be victorious with him.

What a wonderful passage for this day, when we celebrate our anniversary. None of the people who have sat on those pews were without at least one affliction when they walked into these buildings. Many fought courageous battles against the forces that possessed them, just to sit where you are and hear a story of healing and acceptance. Pessimism, lack of faith, anger in all its forms, addiction, doubts, marital conflicts, illnesses, financial worries, depression, anxiety, etc. They fought these enemies and came in looking for healing and understanding. And Jesus, the healer met them here, and powerfully commanded those forces to be silent and to leave them. And they found grace and forgiveness at this altar. They found the courage to go on. They found peace and joy.

Others came in looking for connection, a little unsure at first, nervously waiting for a word of welcome and an invitation to coffee. And they found that connection both with God and with life-long friends, and that connection has made all the difference in their lives. I have visited many of you at home and I have often heard what this church means to you. In many ways, all of us have been like that man in Capernaum: We came in as unholy, overwhelmed, and exhausted men and women on the holiest day of the week, to this holy place, to meet the Holy One of God. And we found healing week after week, we found grace and mercy, we found a new family, we found each other.

As we celebrate 55 years together, let us give thanks to God for his faithfulness and mercy and let us ask for his blessing as we continue to gather in this place to be the people of God and to exclaim with the community of Mark that great first century exclamation: “Come, Lord Jesus, Come!”

May he continue to bless you, Amen!