

January 28, 2018

(Mark 1: 21- 28)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This gospel story is one of those that is kind of “out there”.

It starts out well enough. At first, Mark seems to be reporting facts, like watching the 6:00 news. Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. There is nothing unusual about that.

But then the story gets sensational...kind of like TV at 7:00. Jesus has a conversation with...an unclean spirit...the details of which are reported like in a court transcript. That **is** hard for **us** to picture as witnesses, which is the way in which this gospel story is told. Then, we hear what seems just as unbelievable to us: the response of that congregation. Those witnesses who were present saying essentially to each other in amazement, “What is up with this? A new teaching? And it is like he knows what he is doing, as he sends the evil spirit packing!!”

If that happened, right here, right now...what would WE do? Would we turn around to each other and say, "What is this? ... A new teaching?" What do you think? On what words, or parts, of this reading do YOU focus on?

It is the “unclean spirit” part, right? The unclean spirit, causing the man to convulse, and so on. Since the movie, “The Exorcist”, Hollywood has made a fortune, and in the process left very little to our imagination, in our collective experience of such things. If we had an “unclean spirit” experience like this...the kind that we envision through Hollywood’s imagination, and had it right here and right now...we would literally run right out of here in terror. I think the **last** thing we would do would be to sit around and talk about it...marveling about “new teaching”.

This gives us a glimpse of the greatest problem Christians have today. In this 21st century, we need to analyze and categorize our world and all that is in it, so we cannot take the whole scripture “seriously” because it is not real to us. After all, when was the last time **you** overheard a verbal conversation between an unclean spirit and anybody else, let alone Jesus?

So, because we have not witnessed these things, our faith is conditional. Conditional upon our understanding of the “reality” of **our** world. If we endure life long enough, we get bent a bit like the tops of windblown trees...and we selectively believe what we allow ourselves to believe. What’s more...God...and Jesus...become more and more remote from us. Jesus walked on water, raised Lazarus from the dead, and did all this other stuff. **No way** can I do any of that. So, how can we talk about “good news” in this world, when in some ways it seems like a

fairy tale to us? Well, let us look at today's gospel reading in a different light.

Let us start with the obvious roadblock to our understanding and application by the subplot of the "unclean spirit". It is true that the Hollywood extreme we imagine or envision is rare, or even non-existent to us. But, in a different light, I tell you that I verbally hear the voices of unclean spirits all the time. Particularly in my other work environment.

People come and share their emotional pain, often to the point of complete despair. To the point and extent that they abandon absolutely all sense of the divine peace and presence that they were born with. They bring me pages and pages of print-outs of searing, sub-human statements made on Facebook that I will not even read. And they often launch into strings of curses and profanity that I have to aggressively stop in order to help them gain self-control. Utterances of curses and profanity increasingly flood our culture, our regular language as a people, which to me are evidence of...what? If you think Linda Blair, on the big screen, had the exclusive on "unclean spirits", think again.

Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as is his custom. There is only one temple, but synagogues are widely scattered and devoted to the study of scripture. Sabbath worship includes prayer and the public reading and exposition of the scriptures. The role of the president of the synagogue is more administrative than pastoral, so he invites qualified laymen to speak, and synagogue rulers would welcome a fresh, promising voice, which explains how Jesus could teach in the synagogue.

Even though any Jewish male with sufficient knowledge could teach, the scribes were specialists in the interpretation and application of Mosaic law to daily life. They frequently quoted scripture, and rendered binding judgments regarding its application. They tended to be conservative, rendering judgments based on precedent, and derived authority from their knowledge of the authorities whom they quote. By the time of Jesus, they were powerful and enjoyed considerable deference. The best seats in the synagogue were reserved for them, and people rose to their feet when they entered a room, calling them "rabbi," which means "great one".

However, on **this** occasion at the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus preaches differently. We do not know the details of what he said or how he said it. But, what **is** clear is that he spoke in the manner which conveyed that he personally had **the** authority. So much so that, where is the **real** emphasis in this reading? It was **not** the casting out of the unclean spirit, but rather the astonishment of the hearers. The astonishment was for the teaching...and not in the casting out.

Imagine that.

His authority is based neither on credentials nor on his ability to cite precedents, but on the Spirit that descended on him at his baptism. His authority comes from God.

And...lo and behold...our authority comes from God as well...and that is the good news that Jesus walked all over Palestine to announce. The kingdom of God has come near, he said. Well, it is here **NOW**...and has been here for 2000 years.

As Christians, each one of us is granted authority by God to speak in his name. We are called by Jesus to go out in the Spirit to preach, and teach, and heal..all in the ways we live our lives. By walking the walk. To care for others and to show them the love of God.

Jesus even gives the authority to forgive the sins of others in the name of God.

So what has happened to the church, to the people of God that so many fail to exercise this authority? It is the fear of our own frailty...the result of that conditional faith, of believing what seems plausible to us from scripture in our overwhelming 21st century lives. We do not listen for what God is telling us to do, or maybe it is more not knowing how to see or what to listen to. Or, maybe we do not do it the way we have been shown, or we simply do not care at all. We try to solve problems on our own power, using our own insights, our own wisdom.

For centuries, Israel waited for its redemption, its reunification with God. Waited for the fulfillment of the covenant, waited to be delivered by God into the promise of living as God's chosen people to the world. They waited at the temple, as do many of their descendants at the wall in Jerusalem. Yet, Jesus came to announce that the waiting was over...that through the Holy Spirit, the way to God was clear...through him. And, through the Holy Spirit among us...the kingdom of God **is** here for us.

We are called to use it to do the work of God in this world. To heal, to teach, to bring justice, and to grant mercy, and the demons around us will begin to disappear.

May we have the faith to engage the life...the calling to live into that abundant life that God tells us is already ours for the taking, as we worship and celebrate that life in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.