

GOSPEL READING: Mark 1:21-28

²¹ And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; ²⁴ and he cried out, "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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

“Astonished”

It happened in a synagogue in Capernaum. It was the Sabbath, and a congregation was gathered, quietly sitting in the worship space. Then Jesus began to teach. What he said we’re not told, for that is not what was most important. It was how he taught. Suddenly, shattering the decorum of the Sanctuary, a man with an unclean spirit cried out, “*I know you, Jesus. You are the Holy One of God, come to destroy us.*” (Well, these days, we don’t know exactly how to process “unclean spirit”, but certainly we want to avoid the way it’s been conflated with mental illness over the centuries. No doubt this man was being held captive by something evil. He may have become a danger to himself and others, and he was probably a social outcast).¹

The demons in him cried out. They recognized Jesus, when no others did, because they knew their enemy. They’d met him before.² But we’re told that Jesus spoke to them with authority. His authority had both “right” and “power”, a right to speak as God and a “power” which came from himself.³ It was grounded in mercy and a love without end. He looked the demons in the eye and uttered a command that caused all hell to break loose. “*Be silent, and come out of him!*” he said. The demons stirred and left the man. And the people were astonished...breathless...overwhelmed with wonder and amazement in the presence of the Lord. They said, “*What is this?*”. “*What is this?*”

Yes, they were astonished and yes, “Jesus spoke with authority”. It was not the authority of a political leader...no, not at all. Nor was it the authority that the Rich and Influential claim. No, it was an authority claimed by one standing against the forces which rob people of abundant life and joy. The Capernaum congregation and people that came after them would never encounter a teacher like this again who did what he believed and who embodied what he preached! When he said, “*love your enemies,*” he did it. When he said, “*Don’t worry, trust God*”, he showed them how. When he said, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the*

¹David Lose. “Epiphany 4 Against the Robbers”. <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/01/epiphany-4-b-against-the-robbers/>. (accessed 1-26-24).

²Rachel May. Sermon: “Even the Demons” www.asermonforeversunday.com (accessed 1/25/18).

³Lamar Williamson, Jr. “*Interpretation: Mark*”. Mays, Achtemier, eds, (Louisville: JKP; 1983), 50-51.

meek, blessed are the merciful,” he lived like that, even to the point of removing demons from a suffering soul.⁴

So.....here in Mark’s gospel story, brothers and sisters, we’re not to focus ultimately on the demons, nor are we to concentrate on what they have to say or even how Jesus effectively exorcised them. That’s not what this story is about. This story is given us to make clear what the rest of the gospel is about! It is about the One for whom no oppressive boundary will stand, about the One in whom the boundary between heaven and earth has been pierced, and about the One in whom the new age of God’s reign has come.⁵ Here in Mark’s gospel, we need be astonished as well. We need feel our breath being snatched away, and ourselves to be gob smacked and startled, for we are, in our pews like the people in that synagogue, being confronted with Jesus as the Christ.

And that’s not all. What’s more, we, we are being called by Christ’s Spirit in our midst to go from here living as he did, as channels for his authority, to quell the demons that still haunt this fractured world.

Yes, brothers and sisters, each of us, in one way or another, is being called to make a fundamental decision, to determine somewhere deep in our hearts, who or what will have authority for us, who will have the place in our hearts where we make daily decisions about how to live, whom we will obey, and whom we will trust and follow. Through this Gospel reading today, each of us, is being called to go out to stare into the eyes of the demons that disturb, demons of hatred and fear, of violence and self-worship, of discrimination and prejudice, of lies and deception, of contention and argument, (especially so...how exhausting this demon is...on top of all else that comes our way in the every day living, contention and argument wrings the energy and joy out of us and it is deadly. It is around us all, all the time these days). Each of us is called to stare into the eyes of it and any force which keeps people down and robs them of abundant life. And each of us is called to proclaim to them in word and deed Christ’s truths: that love that conquers hate, that violence only precipitates more violence,

⁴ John Buchanan. “Astonished”. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2008/060108.html> (accessed 1-26-24).

⁵ Gary Charles. “Exegetical Perspective of Mk 1:21-28” In: D Bartlett, B Brown Taylor (eds), Feasting on the Word. (Louisville: WJKP; 2008), 313.

that more joy is gained in giving than receiving, and that sacrificing our lives for others is how we come to be fully alive. Each of us is asked to here respond to Christ's call, to make him and his way the bedrock on which we base our living, the authority for our lives in a hurting world. (*pause*). It is a daunting call for sure, but yet, after we shake ourselves from our astonished and startled state, it is very much there!

Saying this, however, I think it important to remind ourselves what Peter Gomes once astutely observed. That is, that Jesus does not call us to do superhuman things. He asks us to *'Brighten the corner where we are...'* He asks us to live up fully to our humanity in the place that we are put. He asks us to live as bravely and fully there as he did, and to be the kind of men and women God has created us to be. When we live like that—even when we fail, disobey, stumble, and fall...as we will...we will always be “becoming”, and we will always feel the sustaining love and encompassing forgiveness of Jesus Christ, [and the world will always be a bit more kind, gentle and life-giving because of it].⁶

I would like to share with you a story shared by Rev. John Buchanan back in 2008. He shared it then with his congregation. He writes, “PFC Ross McGinnis, 19, from Knox, PA, was driving his Humvee in Iraq. His unit came under fire. A live grenade came through the gunner hatch and landed in the compartment of the vehicle where four of Private McGinnis's buddies were sitting. The door of the Humvee was to his left. All Ross had to do was pull the latch, bail out, and save himself. Instead, 19-year-old Ross McGinnis threw himself on the grenade, took the full impact, died, and saved the lives of his four friends. By happenstance, Rev Buchanan discovered that a member of his church had a nephew who was close to the McGinnis family. The member called him and asked to have the congregation pray for the McGinnis family who were going to the White House the next day to receive the Medal of Honor for their son. After this, Rev. Buchanan decided to additionally call Ross McGinnis's mother to offer his sympathies, his gratitude, and to ask permission to share her son's story. She was pleased and agreed. She shared that they were church people, members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, where

⁶ Peter Gomes. <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-hard-stuff-is-the-good-news/> (accessed 1-26-24).

Ross was baptized and confirmed.” “However,” she said, “Ross wasn’t much of a churchgoer.” To this, John Buchanan responded as I hope I would have, “I believe he got the message,” John said. Ultimately, Rev Buchanan’s conclusion is this: While the McGinnis family wasn’t of one mind about the war, as America at that time was not, it was clear that in the midst of it all, a young man, in his 19 years, had come to the conclusion that the highest, holiest thing anyone can do is give life away for the sake of others This, is the idea that Jesus expressed and embodied, and idea that is truth for his followers, authority for the living of their lives, authority which is simply amazing, astonishing and startling.⁷ RIGHT!

Brothers and sisters, we are called to let Jesus have authority for the living of our lives. In this, we can be channels for his love and mercy and kindness and grace to touch and heal the brokenness of corner of the world in which live. For God is opposed to anything and everything that robs God’s beloved children, including ourselves, of the abundant life he has in store for us! So, we need go...we need go today from here to share in word and deed God’s unconditional love that accepts and affirms and celebrates the lives of every human being to the extent that all may be amazed, all may be startled and yes, all may be just astonished. Amen.

⁷ Buchanan.