

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
31 January 2021

Mark 1:21-28

I was thinking about our own Jerry Shattle the other day when I was writing this sermon. Not just because he was on national television, which was impressive enough, but because he reminds me of the Gospel of Mark. Jerry lost 150 lbs. through running and it seems like Mark is on a race of his own. I woke up this morning thinking that I would go for a run, but then I remembered that I do not like running, so instead I had Cheese Puffs for breakfast. Anyway, Mark starts his Gospel telling us about John the Baptist, but immediately he moves from the Baptist to Jesus' Baptism, to the temptation, to the selection of first disciples, to the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, to the episode of today's Gospel: the teaching in Capernaum and the healing of the unclean spirit. And we are still in the first chapter, and only on verse 21.

Our passage mentions that Jesus was traveling with his disciples, but it does not tell us much about these people. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no complete list of them in Mark. In our passage, Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. We know of the calling of the first four Apostles (Simon, Andrew, James and John), but so far in Mark we haven't heard anything about the rest of the apostles, and we haven't heard anything about the rest of the disciples. I often wonder who these people were and why they were so attracted to Jesus of Nazareth. What was it about him that was so compelling these folks followed him whatever he went? What did they see in him? The passage also does not tell us what his teaching in Capernaum was about. It is almost as though for Mark the fact that Jesus is on the move is more important than the actual content of the teaching. We do know that in Galilee he taught about repentance and the Kingdom of God being near. Perhaps this is what he is teaching about in Capernaum. Whatever he was teaching, this was a different type of teaching for his listeners. They had never heard such teaching. This was new, fresh, powerful teaching.

The passage today gives us a clue as to why the disciples were following Jesus. It tells us that after Jesus' teaching, his listeners "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." His teaching had authority! I find this very interesting. What is Mark trying to tell us? Didn't the Scribes teach with authority? They who were the teachers of the law, the interpreters of Jewish sages, the lawyers of the day. Didn't they also have authority? What was so different about Jesus's teaching that made the Scribes' teachings pale by comparison? This could be a bit of anti-Scribal sentiment in Mark, a bit of a critique on the religious establishment. But I believe it goes beyond political commentary on the powers of the day.

The disciples present were truly impressed by the newness of Jesus' teaching. Jesus' authority is different to the Scribes, who for the most part translate and interpret the Law of Israel (Torah). Their job is to interpret for the people what is written by the authors of the Torah, and by the commentaries on the Law written by famous Rabbis. Their job is not to make the law, but to interpret it. Their job is not to speak on their own behalf or to impart their own knowledge, but rather to help people understand and obey the teachings of others

(Moses, ancient Rabbis, etc.) Their authority comes from faithfulness to the text and the teachings of the person they are teaching about. Like a history professor who is an expert on Lincoln, for example. His authority comes from his ability to speak accurately about the president, his life, his accomplishments, his thinking and his legacy. If the historian's teachings are filled with inaccuracies, his authority as an expert can be questioned.

Jesus' authority is altogether different. His teaching is not about the Law necessarily. He is not the interpreter of famous Rabbis and he does not claim this, even though when called upon to interpret the Law or the prophets he is quite able to place them in their proper context. His teaching is new. He is speaking of a new kingdom, a new world order ruled by God's mercy and grace, and a new way for people to experience God's presence in their lives. He is more concerned with people finding their way to God than he is about blind obedience to rules, statutes, regulations, and celebrations. He speaks of the Sabbath being for man rather than man being for the Sabbath. He speaks of God as being near. He proclaims God's willingness to forgive humanity. It is this knowledge of God's infinite love for humanity that led Jesus to teach in Galilee that, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (V.15). Jesus' teaching are not about oppressive rules that must be obeyed, but rather about "Good News." His teachings are about freedom, love, forgiveness, service, and transformation. His authority comes from the fact that his teachings are his and not an interpretation of anybody else's teachings. He is here to speak on behalf of God himself. Jesus is both the teacher and the content of the teaching. His authority rests as much on his skills as a preacher as they rest on who he is as the Son of God. Jesus is speaking about himself. This is where his authority comes from.

Now, as if to prove his point, Jesus engages in a conversation with a most unlikely of characters. The text tells us that, "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him." I find it very interesting that the first voice in the Gospel of Mark that acknowledges that Jesus is the "Holy One of God" is an evil spirit. The great irony is that while evil spirits are willing to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the teachers of the law and many others will refuse to acknowledge Jesus as such. Even Jesus' power to expel evil spirits will not be sufficient to convince some that he is the one who was to come into the world, the one promised to Moses and the prophets.

Right after the expulsion of the evil spirit, Mark tells us that "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching-- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" For the second time in this short passage we hear the words "Amazed (astounded)" and "authority." The crowds are amazed at Jesus' ability to speak powerfully even to the reality of evil. They kept asking each other about who this Jesus was and what this new teaching was about. They were shaken to their foundations, moved to the core. They had come face to face with the divine power of the Messiah and their lives would never be the same. Many of them knew in their hearts that only the Messiah could do the things this man had just done. Many knew that only this man had the power to save and to liberate. Even the evil forces of this world had no power to resist Jesus. Only he could give health and restoration to the possessed man. Only he could

utter a word of healing that could restore the man's full humanity. They were so moved that they "began to spread stories about Jesus throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

My friends, we are here today because at some point in our lives we too came face to face with the power and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. We are here because we have come to understand that only this Jesus has the power to conquer the evil of this world. Only this Jesus can speak a powerful word of forgiveness into our lives, a powerful word that can liberate us from our bonds and can restore us to health. We are here today because we know that only Jesus can speak with authority about our human condition and only he can redeem our broken humanity. We gather here today for the same reason those who came before us gathered here. They were convinced that Jesus was Good News for them, for their families, and for their community. Many of them came to Jesus through personal trials and pain. Many of them came to Jesus as children of Christian parents. Many of them were brought into the faith through marriage or relocation to this area.

But regardless of how they came to know Jesus, they gathered here week after week to offer their lives to God and to ask for his protection and his provision. They gathered to pray and to read Holy Scripture. They gathered to be reminded week after week of God's infinite love for them and for those in their circles of influence. They gathered here, not because they had no place else to go, but because there was no place they would rather be. They gathered here to dream, to mourn, to pray, and to celebrate. Not because they believed Jesus to be a nice guy, but because they knew that Jesus of Nazareth is the Savior and Redeemer of the world. They knew that no one could love them and understand them as Jesus of Nazareth could. They knew that Jesus of Nazareth was and is Good News!

We too are here today because Jesus is Good News for our lives, in the same way that he has been Good News in the life of Saint Dunstan's Church for over 50 years. In a world filled with righteous moralism, Jesus speaks a word of acceptance and love into our lives. In a world filled with despair, Jesus speaks a word of hope into our lives. In a world overrun with sin, selfishness, and materialism, Jesus speaks a word of forgiveness into our lives. We are here not because Jesus is a "good chap," but because he is our Savior.

So, today, as we give thanks to God for all our blessings, we also ask God's protection and provision for our church and for our families for many years to come. We ask that God may continue to bless our ministries and our life together that we may continue to grow in our knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Good News of our Salvation. Amen!