

"I KNOW WHO YOU ARE"

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Mark 1:21-28

(01-31-21)

You will have received information from the church office this week about the upcoming Lent Bible Study. We will be using a guide written by Dr. Amy Jill Levine, who teaches at Vanderbilt University. We used her guide for Advent just a couple of months ago as well. She is an excellent scholar and she's really interesting and engaging to hear in person. Dr. Levine is presenting the G. Peter Kaye Lectures at VST this coming Friday, Feb 5. Of course, the lecture will be online, as is mostly everything these days, but a number of years back I had the pleasure of hearing Dr. Levine in person as she spoke at a synagogue in Calgary. Dr. Levine is an orthodox Jew and expert in New Testament studies. She spoke in the synagogue for about an hour and the time flew by because she spoke as one with authority. Her authority primarily comes through her knowledge and expertise around the scriptures which would have been accumulated through many years of study and teaching. Her lecture was enlightening and enjoyable. I would say that those of us gathered there were appreciative of her knowledge and her passion, but I wasn't surprised, it was what I expected it to be.

In another synagogue, in another place, a place called Capernaum in Galilee, in another time, around 2000 years ago, there was another who taught as one with authority. But his authority did not come from only his knowledge of scripture or his passion, **but it came from who he was.** Things happen pretty quickly in Mark's gospel account. Jesus has barely begun his ministry, he's been baptized, he's been tempted in the wilderness by Satan and after his cousin John was arrested, Jesus began to proclaim the good news of God, saying, **"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."** In Galilee Jesus called his first disciples, and now along with them he went to Capernaum, which was on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, and on the Sabbath, he taught in the synagogue.

I think we can all think of at least a handful of teachers we have experienced who taught in such a way that we weren't sure whether they really knew their stuff and we were absolutely sure that they didn't have any passion for it, at least that's what it appeared to us like. **But not all of us have had experience of the other side, that teacher, that person who taught with such passion, such purpose, whose very presence lent them an air of credibility, someone who taught with authority.** I remember listening to Bill Turner at Duke Divinity School during a summer school session on reconciliation I took a few years ago. Bill Turner is African American and now Professor Emeritus of the Practice of Preaching. He is the first African American on the faculty of Duke Divinity and was one of the first two African American players on the Duke University football team. He talked to us about his experience of being black in the U.S., of how he was discriminated against as one of the first black students at Duke,

a prestigious private school in North Carolina, and how he persevered and became the professor of preaching at Duke. He spoke as one with authority because he lived what he taught, it came from who he was. And not only that, he was a great communicator, after all, you don't become professor of the practice of preaching if you can't preach! I could have sat there and listened to him all week.

Jesus is the ordinary preacher's worst nightmare. You're a minister going on holidays and you try to find someone to fill the pulpit and maybe someone recommends a person to you or you just go down the list of available supply preachers and book the first one who is available. But then you show up after your holidays and your congregation can't stop talking about the guest preacher! It's as if they had never heard the gospel preached before! You make a mental note to never ask that preacher back.

Some hapless scribe in the local synagogue in Capernaum made the mistake of inviting Jesus to teach there one Sabbath. **Our text says that Jesus' teaching astounded those who were gathered because he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes.** You think about what that means...he taught as one having authority, not like the scribes. You can envision a synagogue where the scribes had been teaching, but teaching without a real sense of authority. You can imagine a dull, maybe lifeless routine, where people dutifully showed up each Sabbath, expecting to hear the readings from the scriptures, but you don't get the sense that the townsfolk gathered with any enthusiasm and certainly you don't get from the text any notion that they had expectations of anything but the ordinary. **Then Jesus comes and he's like no other guest preacher they've ever had.** There's something in his voice, his tone, in his mannerism. It's not like the scribes, beholden to the text, **but with Jesus, it's like the text belongs to him.**

And as the people in the synagogue are engrossed in what Jesus has been saying, the way he's been saying it, **suddenly they're disrupted by a most unfortunate circumstance.** There's a man in the synagogue who has an unclean spirit and he shouts 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!"** The people in the synagogue must have been mortified. Here was their guest preacher and he was doing such a bang up job, keeping their attention, teaching with authority, but then this man interrupts and starts shouting. Maybe the ushers were on their way to escort him out, but Jesus confronts the man. He rebuked him, saying, **"Be silent, come out of him!"** And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. And all those gathered were amazed. Imagine the stories that they would have told. **You missed synagogue today, you should have been there!** Jesus of Nazareth was there and he cast a demon out from Benjamin the barber today. **Oh, you should have been there!**

I wonder what the story is doing here in these very first verses of Mark's gospel? Mark's gospel account is the most economical of the four gospels. **If a story is in Mark, it better have a good reason to be there.** What does the man with the unclean spirit represent?

Following on the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan, maybe the man with the unclean spirit represents the forces of evil and chaos in the world, that which is of Satan and that which will oppose Jesus and what Jesus stands for. Maybe he represents the powers and principalities of this world and all that would possess us and obstruct the fullness of life that God intends for all God's creation.

Or maybe the man represents something more intimate, not just a symbol for cosmic forces or even worldly ones, but maybe the man with the unclean spirit is here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry because he represents our reality, that Jesus will indeed battle the forces of evil and chaos, and Jesus will take on the powers and principalities that oppose his kingdom reign, **but that in reality, those things aren't located in some abstract idea, they are located in us, in people, people like that man in Capernaum and people like you and me today.**

Texts like this make us uncomfortable, don't they? Stories of unclean spirits speak a language that is unfamiliar to us. When's the last time you spoke to anyone about an unclean spirit? We read stories like this and we think of Linda Blair and the exorcist, people with their heads spinning around and strange projectile vomiting. Many modern people try to explain the unclean spirit as being a pre-scientific way of speaking of medical issues, perhaps mental illness, perhaps a physical condition. **But let's not try to explain away our embarrassment; rather let's take a look at the text.** What we see is that the man is **not an outsider. He's there in the synagogue, he belongs there.** So I'm thinking this isn't someone who has an identifiable condition, he's not someone who's considered unclean or else he wouldn't be there, he wouldn't be welcome. **He's like everyone else, at least on the outside, and maybe even on the inside.**

He's like everyone else, except he isn't. **He alone among those gathered there in that synagogue in Capernaum, understands who Jesus is.** "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.**"

Here in these very early days of Jesus' ministry, this man with the unclean spirit, knows who Jesus is before just about anyone else. Simon and Andrew, James and John, they leave their nets and even their father and follow Jesus when Jesus comes calling, **but you wonder whether these first disciples really know what they've gotten themselves into.**

This man in Capernaum has no doubt. I know who you are, the Holy One of God.

The others know that Jesus teaches with an uncommon authority, that he teaches a newness that speaks to their hearts...**but they don't know.**

For all they know, this Jesus is just the next in line of a long line of the next big thing. Is he the messiah? Well, there's been a whole host of would-be messiahs that haven't lived up to the billing. They don't know, but the man with the unclean spirit knows. I know who you are, the Holy One of God. **And not only does he know who Jesus is, he knows what it means for him that Jesus is who he is.**

What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? **The man knows that because Jesus is the Holy One of God that his life is going to change. He's never going to be the same again.** And Jesus delivers. Be silent...come out of him! And just like that, it's over. The unclean spirit convulses the man and leaves his body. We don't know what happened to the unclean spirit and Mark seems unconcerned about it. **What Mark is concerned about is letting his readers know that when Jesus is in our midst, when the Holy One of God is among us and we recognize who he is, something's gonna change.**

Do we know who Jesus is? Is he among us this morning? Is Jesus, is the Holy One of God, the spirit of God, among us? **And if he is, do we know who he is? And if so, what does that mean for us?**

My wife Sophie tells me that there's a Korean song that says that within each of us there are many different us's. I don't know the song and I probably couldn't understand the lyrics, but I'll take her word on it. And it speaks a truth, doesn't it? All of us have many people inside us, all those parts of us that possess us and makes us who we are. When the man at the synagogue cries out to Jesus, what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, **is that what he means by "us"?**

There's lots of us's in us. There's the part of us who's possessed by our stuff, who define who we are by what we have. There's the part of us who's possessed by our anger, our rage at the injustice we've been dealt, the unfairness of life. There's the part of us who's possessed by our fear, our fear of failure, our fear of being alone, our fear of dependence. There's the part of us who's possessed by our insecurities, our false bravado, our worries. **And the reality is that all those parts of us that possess us, also keep us from knowing the fullness of the good news God intends for us.**

We all have these parts that live within us, and most of the time we're pretty good at managing them and presenting what we want to present so that people will think that we've got it mostly together.

Until those times when someone or something picks at the scar or rubs us the wrong way and all those things we think we've got under control come rushing to the surface again, betraying our sense of control, possessing us in anger, in fear, in worry and insecurity, in false comfort and idolatrous confidence.

And then one day along comes Jesus, proclaiming the newness of God's good news, telling us that the kingdom of God is near, inviting us to repent and come to know new life. And he does it with an authority borne of his identity as the Holy One of God, **and we who know who Jesus is, we know that we are being called out, that the us's that are in us are being called out, called out so that all those things that possess us and oppose God's plans for us can be driven out so that the only one who possesses us will be God alone.**

I get the sense that our present context of the pandemic makes the us's in us even more pronounced. When we are stripped of the social structures and interactions that help to define and moderate how we present ourselves to the world, when we spend so much time alone, or in our currently political climate, in echo chambers with those who only think like us, I wonder whether this is what leads to the anger, the fear, the willingness to embrace extremes that we have seen. I wonder whether when the routines we depend on aren't there, that we revert to those us's more than we usually do?

Is this story in Mark's gospel because the ministry of Jesus, the work of the kingdom of God, God's mission of renewal, restoration and love in the world has to find its target, not in some abstract idea or global goal, but in us, **in those of us who will either be possessed by the powers and temptations of this world and work towards the reign of that kind of kingdom or possessed by Jesus and vision of the unfolding kingdom of God?**

What have you to do with us, shrieks the unclean spirit. **And it's the question that hangs over us today, isn't it?** What does Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God have to do with us? What does Jesus have to do with us? In a world where terror, fear, insecurity, worry, anxiety, false confidence, idolatry and so much more threatens to overwhelm our hope, **the good news is that Jesus has everything to do with us.**

Do we know who we're dealing with here? In worship, as we confess our need for God and profess that God is here, in our midst, will we be like the man at the synagogue and understand who Jesus is, that he is the Holy One of God? Will we come to worship expecting only the expected, or will we be open to the fact that no matter who stands here preaching or praying or singing, that Christ is among us, present in our midst, as the Holy One of God, **and that because of that there's no way to predict what might happen, what might happen to us!**

I used to laugh at a certain televangelist who would often put his hand up against the camera inviting people to put their hands on their TV screens so that he could transmit power to them through the TV. Now, I am not going to tell you to put your hands on your computer screen or on your phone screen so that I can send power to you, but you know what, in this restricted pandemic context, **I absolutely believe that God's Spirit touches us, even when we are not physically together, not because of me, but because of God's power, that even sitting there at home on a Sunday morning, or whenever you might be watching this service, that God's spirit can do something unpredictable in our lives.**

What does the Holy One of God have to do with us? **Everything!** God's amazing love for God's creation made known in Jesus Christ is the gift of new life. **He is the invitation to let go of all those parts of us that possess us and to trust in God alone.** Jesus, the Holy One of God in our midst is the loving, constant invitation to hear God's call, to follow him and the way of life of his unfolding kingdom, **and in the doing, to come to know life in all its abundance, meaning and purpose.**

What does Jesus have to do with us? Everything!

Thanks be to God. Amen.