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Weekend of Sunday, January 28, 2018
4th Sunday After Epiphany/Lectionary 4/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 1:21-28
Sermon Title: “*And So it Begins*”

Theme

The story has barely begun, and already the battle is joined. Jesus sides with humanity against every force that would bring death and disease. These forces recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. This, however, is only the first fight. The war will go on much longer.

Text

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon

I find it helpful to understand the context of scripture when reading it or hearing it or referring to it in a sermon. For instance, last week, for the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany, the reading was from Mark 1:14-20. The only thing that had happened preceding that text of Mark's gospel was the reference to Isaiah's prophecy about the coming of the forerunner to God's Messiah, one whom Christians believe is John the Baptizer, and the subsequent baptism of Jesus by John. Then last week's gospel reading was Jesus initiating his ministry by the calling of his first disciples.

Today's gospel reading follows that reading directly and as you just heard, it begins, **“²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.”**

Now just to be clear, according to Mark, Jesus had only collected four disciples so far. From last week's gospel reading you will remember that he called the four fisherman, Simon and his brother Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and his brother John. So that is the totality of his followers so far. He will pick more in the subsequent chapters, but as far as Mark was concerned, Jesus and the four are all he was writing about when he wrote “Jesus and his disciples.”

You heard the story, Jesus, who was completely unknown at this point in time, went to Capernaum and went into the synagogue and began to teach his fellow Jews how to apply God's word, scripture, to their lives. The reading doesn't include any of the content of his teaching that day but it must have been awesome, awesome like the Capernaumites (I might have just made up that name) had never heard before. Mark wrote and I quote, **“²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”**

And then, while they were still looking at him, and sizing him up, and wondering just who this itinerant rabbi was, a man with an “unclean spirit” (today we would probably call this man a person with an untreated mental illness) called out to Jesus. Immediately Jesus rebuked him and called the spirit out – and instantly the man was made well! And to quote Mark once again, this caused the Capernaumites to say, **^{27b}“What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”**

And to that Mark added, “²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

And so it begins.

In this passage, right from the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he demonstrated what his ministry was all about. To the religious establishment, he demonstrated his authority with intimate knowledge of God and what godly living was all about.

And then Jesus demonstrated his command over all the forces of evil manifested in this story by the man with an unclean spirit. Mark concluded this passage by saying that everyone was amazed at his *power*, and not just power, a bully can have power, but he also had *authority* over such forces of evil. And his fame and notoriety began to spread throughout the land.

Be on notice, you who claim to have the only access to God, Jesus has brought that access face to face in his being.

And be on notice forces of evil and all forms of illness and brokenness and ungodly behavior that is not of God. By his own example, Jesus has demonstrated the power and authority of God and what the godly life looks like.

And so it begins.

The apostle Paul did more of the same in the Second Reading. Again, I think a little context here is helpful. Though most of us know First Corinthians because of chapter 13, “the Love Chapter” the truth is the Corinthian church was full of ornery characters. The social problems that caused strife among the fellowship included:

- the authority of the apostles and elders of the church,
- fidelity in marriage,
- classism,
- faithfulness to the worship of God revealed in Jesus Christ alone in opposition to the idolatry of the prevailing culture,
- spiritual maturity,
- the care of the less well-off,

- spiritual gifts and Gnosticism – the claim that some have special spiritual knowledge that others are not privy to,
- and so on.

After hearing that list of dirty laundry we ought to feel a little better about ourselves, shouldn't we?

Well, in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote about a couple of those specific issues, but the specific issues are not as important as the general issue of engaging in non-Christian behavior that was setting a bad example to others both inside the church and to those outside the church. You see we do have a responsibility for each other and we are not to demonstrate behavior that might cause another to sin. And to say that more positively, we are to live godly lives as living examples of our devotion to he who is Lord of our lives, and the example of godly living, Jesus Christ.

So therefore as Paul wrote and I paraphrase, we know that nothing is illegal for us, but that doesn't make it a good and godly for us either, so always do the good and godly thing and others will see our example and will be led to do the same.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Well, what does that mean for you and me? I am so glad you asked. As his disciples today, we who call Jesus Lord of our lives, need to honor his lordship over our lives by doing as he did.

We need to be students of scripture so that we too can speak of the things of God with power and authority. We live in a culture where anything goes, there is no authentic authority except for the law. But we are guided by God revealed in Jesus Christ who knew scripture and taught it with power and authority, meaning that what scripture says matters in the disciple's life and directs the disciple's life. So let me ask you a question, how are you going to know how to live a disciple's life if you do not know scripture? And how are you going to lead a disciple's life in your family or community or world if you do not have the power and authority of God given to you by his Holy Spirit?

But being students of the Word, even masters of the Word doesn't mean a thing if we don't apply it to our lives. Jesus knew that sin and the forces of evil are in opposition to God and God's ways and so he called them out with power and authority.

Too often we see mental illness and homelessness and drug addiction and people who perpetrate crime and we shake our heads and buy better locks for our homes, maybe add a security system.

Jesus did not do that! He walked into those situations and said, No more! It is a new day!

What specifically am I talking about and telling you to do? Another good question. I am not familiar with the intimate details of all of your lives, but we have myriad social problems,

- like prejudice and anxiety and stress between races – join us next Sunday morning and afternoon and be a part of the solution.
- To the issue of general rudeness and lack of civility we see demonstrated by public leaders, I say your mother's raised you better than that. Try to be nice to other people. You don't know what they are going through. Show some compassion.
- And to the opiate abuse epidemic, I have to admit, this requires specialized care. Sometimes all we can do is pray, and that doesn't mean it's the least we can do – it is the most we can do when we admit a problem seems to be beyond our abilities and we need God's help.

This does not mean we are powerless and without authority. On the contrary, when we are on our knees, metaphorically or really, we are our most powerful and have the most authority, because that is when we are most in sync with God.

In conclusion, when Jesus appeared on the scene, he changed everything. You can read it for yourself in this gospel passage for today. And so it begins. And then it continues in the second reading from First Corinthians where we have the apostle Paul telling the ornery Corinthians how their behavior is unacceptable in God's eyes.

But it doesn't end there. The new day that Jesus inaugurated continues on through today and all the tomorrows, in fact, until he returns.

Jesus, God's Messiah has broken in to the darkness of human existence and he has changed everything. And those who call him Lord of our lives ought to be about living out his new way in the living out of our lives with power and authority from God, bringing truth to ambiguity, and wholeness wherever we see brokenness.

I know it's a big job. It got Jesus killed. Probably Paul too. But we are not in it alone. The Holy Spirit is with us.

Prayer

Holy Spirit of the Living God revealed in Jesus Christ, we look around at all the trouble in our community and our world and we want to just lock our doors. But that has never been your way to deal with human brokenness. Embolden us so that we might live lives worthy of our calling, and lead others to the truth that is revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is in his name that we pray. Amen