

January 31, 2021
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Year B
Mark 1:21-28
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Amazing!

I have always struggled with preaching on this gospel reading. I am in a tough position to preach on it because I am by training, by education, by profession, a scribe. A scribe in the New Testament was not just someone who copied the words of others, like a scribe from medieval times that we might think about when we hear the word, scribe. A Jewish scribe that the New Testament talks about was someone who stood in the tradition of Ezra, the scribe, someone who read and interpreted the scriptures for the people. A scribe was more what we would think of a modern-day rabbi; or perhaps in a Christian context, a pastor and preacher. A scribe was a reader, interpreter, and teacher of the scripture. And that is what I am. Which is not good news for me, because scribes don't come off very well in this reading. Really, scribes don't end up looking very good in the whole gospel of Mark. Scribes, as part of the whole structure of religious authority and biblical expertise, are part of the group that fails to recognize the presence of God among them. In today's reading, which is part of chapter one of Mark's gospel, the seeds of the conflict between the scribes and the other religious authorities and Jesus are planted. And in today's reading the authority of scribes is found profoundly lacking in comparison with the teachings and actions of Jesus.

So, as a 21st century scribe, I have to ask myself, by what authority do I try to explore what this reading means for us today?

Another challenge of this text is that it deals with unclean spirits, with possession, and with the topic of demons, which is not a topic that we, as contemporary people, who live in a world of science and medical knowledge feel very comfortable with. In fact, I don't think that I have ever heard a Lutheran colleague speak about the unclean spirit that possessed the man in the synagogue in this gospel reading, as anything other than a manifestation of schizophrenia or some other kind of physical or mental malady.

The problem I have always had with that almost every single one of the unclean spirits in the gospels recognize who Jesus is and fear his presence.

If the symptoms of demon possession that are communicated in the gospels are really an ancient way of trying to explain what we now identify as some kind of disease, mental or physical, then the mystery that I have never been able to solve is why is it that these physical or mental illnesses manifest themselves in the same way in almost every case. Is this supposed to be some kind of group delusion, that all of the people who have been cast off and cast out by their society because they have been identified as unclean, are having, that they all, when in the presence of Jesus, say something like, "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 power of the unclean ones, the unclean spirits to collectively and correctly identify the presence of holiness when in the presence of Jesus makes me feel that we can't diminish these encounters by making them organic expressions of some kind of illness rather than expressions of a spiritual battle going on between God and the forces arrayed against God.

As Lutherans, we don't spend a lot of time talking about spiritual warfare, knowing that the sin that has broken the world, the sin that resides

in human hearts, including, when we are willing to be honest about it, our own, is almost always an adequate explanation for the suffering that we see around us in the world. To me, seeking supernatural answers to questions of evil has always almost seemed to be a self-indulgent passing of the buck. The reality is, a huge part of the reason that we suffer and our neighbors suffer is that we have, in extreme, generational, collective and individual ways, given ourselves to the power of sin, to the power of selfishness, to the power of greed, to the power of pride, we have given ourselves up to the love of power itself, and we have declined to take care of each other, physically, emotionally, spiritually and we have declined to take care of the natural world. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But still, I can't help but stand in the discomfort of believing that in this gospel reading, Jesus encounters a true unclean spirit, who knows who he is and recognizes that he is a threat. And by the authority of God, Jesus casts the unclean spirit out.

We have in today's gospel reading, the first of many battles between Jesus and the powers and authorities of this world and of the spiritual world that are arrayed against him. Those battles ultimately culminate in Jesus' crucifixion.

How extraordinary. The agendas of the powers of this world, who did not believe that Jesus was who he said he was, and of the spiritual forces arrayed against God, who knew that Jesus was exactly who he said he was, aligned and Jesus was crucified. Human sin, human rejection of God and demonic rejection of God, worked together to kill Emmanuel, God with us, to tell God to get out of our lives, to get out of our world, to leave us alone,

not to destroy the brokenness, the selfishness, the pride and power we have to harm, that we have come to cherish.

Jesus's crucifixion was a collective howl of all the forces that we repudiate in baptism and affirmation of baptism, the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw us from God, for God to get out our world and out of our lives! All of these God opposed forces in which we participate, joined together to shout the question, "What have you to do with us, you holy one, you!"

And then, of course, in a great act of love, redemption, restoration, recreation, love instead of revenge, life instead of death, God raised Jesus to let us know that God would never let us go, that God would never give us up to our own brokenness and to the powers that truly are destroying us. To let us know the amazing good news that God would never leave us alone, without Emmanuel.

And so, here we are, me, a scribe who prays daily that what I say reflects the teaching of Jesus, the one with authority, and you, a congregation, driven from your church building by the brokenness of disease. Seeing each other only through screens or behind masks, or only hearing each other's voices. Pandemic fatigued people, living through the winter of our discontent.

We can't just chalk it up to 2020 anymore. All of the pain, all of the struggle, the collective trauma that we're living through, not just as a congregation, but as families, as communities, as our towns, our cities, our country, the world, did not miraculously come to an end as a new year began.

Rationally, perhaps we knew that it wouldn't. How could watching a ball drop, hanging up a new calendar, writing a one instead of a zero, truly

change the trajectory of a pandemic or turn the tide of a financial crisis or restore civility and reason to our political life?

We cannot deny that there are powers of sin and evil within us and around us. But still, Jesus speaks. Still Jesus teaches with authority. Still Jesus amazes. Still, we are not alone. The powers of sin that fought so hard to kick God out, to silence the holy one, have not prevailed.

If there was ever something that could kill a community, something that could silence the proclamation of a church, something that could crush hope and make us believe that we are alone in the world, this pandemic could have been it. It has been for us a slow-motion natural disaster, leaving destruction and death in its wake.

But we're still here. And, in our annual report and at our congregational meeting later this morning, you can see all of the ways the teachings of Jesus, and the power of his resurrection have given life to a community assailed by the powers of death.

During this time of struggle, we have continued to meet together, we have sung the songs and told the stories of our faith. We have welcomed others. We have listened to each other's stories, and held each other and our world in prayer. We have sent cards and gifts and prayers shawls and flowers to help people who have faced sickness or loss during this time or who have been alone or struggling. We have continued to teach the children and youth among us. We have made masks and prepared quilts. We have feasted on God's word and at God's table. We have tended to our building, painting and repairing, knowing that someday, we will gather together within these walls again, we will have a joyful reunion.

But in the meantime, we know that we are the church, blessed by the presence of God with us, wherever we are. We who are going through a painful and trying time, are still living in the presence of the resurrected God who will never us alone. And you know what that is? Without question, that is amazing! Amen.