

**MESSAGE: “What’s This? A New Teaching with Authority!”**

**Text: Mark 1:21-28**

**Liturgist Text: Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

**Purpose:** the purpose of this message is to emphasize Jesus’ salvation of the whole person, not just the presenting challenge.

The miracles Jesus performed were certainly impressive; often life-changing for the ones healed, forgiven and rescued. But often the miracle was collateral for the message: proof that his message was from God, a message to pay attention to. Sometimes we are so consumed with resolving the problem at hand that we miss the bigger picture. “Heal us,” we cry, but the question continues, “Heal us for what?” It is the ‘for what’ which Jesus focuses upon: “Now it the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

There are times when we are so focused upon an immediate presenting problem that we miss the deeper condition for which it is a symptom. If, for example, you go to an Urgent Care Center because you have a dry, persistent cough, and you are prescribed medicine which soothes the throat and calms the cough, you might feel it was beneficial, well worth the money and time spent. But if you discover, two or three weeks later, that the cough was caused by an underlying condition which is serious, perhaps even life-threatening, then your satisfaction with the treatment received will be gone in a flash.

In Jesus’ day, there were certainly those who approached him in this manner. “Heal us! Deliver us! Feed us!,” they cried, hoping for relief from life’s immediate struggles; yet even as they jockeyed for relief, they remained oblivious to the spiritual transformation he could offer. I would suggest that we often do the same thing. “Rescue us!,” we cry, unaware that our attitudes, perhaps, are the very things we need rescuing from.

Many biblical scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written by a second-generation Christian, based on the testimony of Peter, sometime between 50 to 70 AD. It may have been written to gentile believers in Rome who were being persecuted by Emperor Nero following a great fire which devastated the city in 64 AD. It is sort of a ‘Dagnet’ character sketch of Jesus’ ministry: the facts and nothing but the facts. It is concise, quick-moving, and likely a written source drawn upon by Matthew and Luke in the writing of their gospels. It emphasizes the authority of Christ over all kinds of opposing forces.

Mark gives no birth narrative. Jesus bursts onto its pages fully grown, engaged in mission. Three years are packed into ten chapters, while Jesus’ final week continues through six more chapters. All of this background information is helpful in understanding the context of Jesus’ encounter with a man possessed by an evil spirit.

After calling his first disciples, Jesus goes with them to Capernaum, a fishing village with a population of about 1500 on the northern side of the Sea of Galilee. He goes to the synagogue and begins teaching. Much to the surprise of those gathered, he teaches with an authority they have not heard before. Rabbinical teachers of Jesus' day based their commentary and teaching on the shoulders of respected rabbis, a relentless scroll of footnotes interspersed throughout the discourse. Jesus did not, and this set him apart.

An immediate question surfaced: "Who is this teacher and where does his authority come from?" It was a fair question, even a necessary one, for as our liturgist read earlier in the service, prophets who claimed to speak the words of God better know what they are doing, for false prophecy was punishable by death.

Jesus, of course, was more than confident of his words, but he knew they would be challenged unless tethered to a demonstration of authority. Enter 'man with an evil spirit.' "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God."

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on healing of the mind, emotions and spirit. There is often a stigma attached to cognitive and emotional disability. This was true in ancient days as it is true today. We often fear what we do not understand. My Dad, for example, was endlessly patient with one of my foster brothers who had what at the time was called a 'hunchback' disability. His physical limitations were obvious. But my Dad often became impatient with another foster brother who had a cognitive disability. The disability was not visible in the same way, to my Dad's endless frustration.

Sadly, this misunderstanding and fear prevents us from accessing mental and emotional care when it is needed. Sometimes, we falsely believe that psychotherapy is for 'weak people who are unable to cope,' when it may be as necessary to the healing of the soul as a cast is to the healing of a broken bone, or surgery is to the healing of appendicitis. Today, we seldom identify mental and emotional disability with 'possession of an evil spirit,' but it often remains shrouded in mystery.

We avoid people who talk with voices we cannot hear and with people we cannot see. That fear often plays into our avoidance of those who struggle with dementia, too. Over the years, I have often been told, "Don't feel like you need to bring communion to them, because they will not understand what it is about anyway." I cannot help but wonder, sometimes, if perhaps they understand it in a way the rest of us can only guess at.

Jesus cares about the whole person: body, mind and spirit. Elsewhere, we read that "he came that we may have life, and have it abundantly." With this in mind, he engages in dialogue with the troubled spirit possessing this man. "Silence!" he commands, "Come out

of him!” According to Mark’s account, “The unclean spirit shook the man, screamed, and then departed.” In a single encounter, Jesus extended his authority from the physical to the mental, emotional and spiritual.

Don’t you find it curious that it is the evil spirit who correctly identifies Jesus for who he is? Everyone else is begging the question, “Who is this man? Where does his teaching come from? What authority does he have? Is he a prophet? How can we sure that what he says is true?” But the evil spirit instantly recognizes Jesus and understands that his time is up.

This demonstration of miracle serves as collateral to Jesus’ message. Having seen his power over the forces of nature in action, the people begin to pay attention to the basic message he proclaims: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Do not be distracted by the fireworks of miracle. It is tempting to read this account as a powerful example of Jesus’ healing power, to recognize that Jesus cares not only about healing the body, but also the mind and emotional self. But that puts the spotlight on the symptom rather than the underlying condition. Jesus cares about the presenting problem, and he brings deliverance to the tortured soul, but he recognizes a much deeper need that is spiritually life-threatening: fractured relationship with God.

Jesus teaches a new ethic, but that is not the central purpose of his coming. Jesus preaches a new message, but that is not the central purpose of his coming. Jesus heals the hurting person, but that is not the central purpose of his coming. Jesus delivers the tortured soul, but that is not the central purpose of his being. Jesus mentors disciples, but that is not the central purpose of his life. Jesus prophetically confronts religious leaders of his day, but that is not the central purpose of his work. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:17)

Jesus is never content with calming the cough; he champions us in the battle against cancer. There can be no wholeness without truth and integrity. There can be no paradise without character development. We are always looking for shortcuts to Eden and the Fountain of Youth. But Jesus knows and knows full well, with a Calvary perspective, that the only way of having it all is by giving it all. What is this? A new teaching? With authority? Maybe we should pay attention to what Jesus has to say...