

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28
01/28/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

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.

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Beginnings

Good morning! Years ago when I was a teenager I decided that I was going to refinish the baseboards and cedar doors to my childhood bedroom. Now my dad had done a similar job downstairs and had opted to leave the old yellow pine trim attached to the wall. But I knew better. So one day after school with a pry bar and hammer I got to work. Besides some wall painting, this was my first attempt at anything like this, and it went about as well as one could expect. I either tore up the baseboards ripping them from the wall or I put holes in the old plaster and lath trying to pry the

stuck trim off the wall. We ended up needing to purchase new baseboards when I was done. I WAS able to finish those nicely, so it wasn't a complete disaster, but so ended my first DIY household project.

Today we learn about beginnings, and most importantly, that you need to start somewhere. While my carpentry skills have only mildly improved, I have learned a lot. It turns out that the best way to learn what not to do is to, well, make those mistakes. It helps you realize that very rarely is a mistake the end of the world. There's always someone better who can help you fix the problem. And a lot of the time what you see as horrible, isn't really that bad in the eyes of someone else. Beginnings are about starting. They're about taking that first step into that new world.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus' beginning too. This is his first formal act of ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Now, while his work certainly went better than my first attempt at home improvement, the first time I read it, I couldn't help but feel well... bored. Let me explain.

Yes, in the moment of the reading, and were it to happen in front of my eyes, this teaching and healing moment would absolutely overpower me. But as someone who's been in the church my whole life, Jesus teaching and healing a person possessed is just another Sunday. The man literally walks on water, comes back from the dead, and multiplies bread and fish. One healing and a sermon that we don't even hear the details about seems a little underwhelming.

But that's when I realized that just like my DIY project, we all have to start somewhere, everything has a beginning, and this is just that for Jesus. It just so happens that his changes the life of a man possessed, whereas mine ended in annoyed parents and a bruised teenager's ego.

But the story is about more than just starting his ministry. It's also about authority. One scholar writes that "*comparisons between Mark's stories and conventional exorcism accounts show that the evangelist is not interested in exorcism for its own sake... Instead, the focus of the story remains the divine authority exercised by Jesus.*"¹ Because this story is very much about God's authority, and whether we the reader will recognize it. Even the image of the demon is about more than we realize. Another

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 408.

scholar writes that “*unclean spirits, evil spirits, and demons are used synonymously in Mark; that is, they have the same denotation (see 5:1-20) but different connotations. Unclean (or evil) spirit connotes ritual impurity, while demon connotes satanic power. Unclean or evil is a translator’s choice, and each is open to misunderstanding. In this context, unclean does not mean physically dirty, and evil does not mean morally depraved. All three terms denote an invisible spiritual being, neither human nor divine, alienated from and hostile to God.*”²

It’s a question the church has faced and will continue to see each and every day. Do we answer to God’s authority, or as the commentator wrote, do we answer to the “invisible... neither human nor divine, alienated from... God”? Because here’s the kicker. If you read the lesson again you’ll notice that while the crowd is astonished at what he says and does, it doesn’t say that they believe and/or follow him. It just says that his fame grew. It seems that even Jesus struggled to convince people to see.

But what remains true regardless is that Jesus responds with the authority of God. And we can follow in those same footsteps too. As the church across the country takes steps to understand where God is calling, we remember two very important things. The first is that we do so choosing Jesus. Our power comes from him and the Triune God.

The second is that we remember that everyone has to start somewhere. Our first steps could take a variety of different directions, ranging from my informative first project to the success of Jesus’ first teaching and healing. Hopefully it leans closer to the second one, but even if it doesn’t that’s ok too! Because as long as we are trying?! That’s what really matters.

The world all around us is hurting. Heck, most of us are too. And deep inside of us is a longing for something better. People choose to fill that pain with all sorts of different things, from the downright hurtful to the average and normal. From drugs all the way to golfing, our souls long for something more. Our hope and goal is that we can be a place where that pain and longing can be healed. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus, working to make the world a better and more loving place, one person at a time. Amen.

² Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. pp. 50-51.