



Sunday, January 31 2021

Mark 1: 21-28

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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National Bishop

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

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And greetings to you from your siblings in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this part of the family of God that we call the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Mark's gospel is really interesting. At least to me it is! It is so compact, so fast moving. In some ways. It's like the *Readers Digest* condensed version of the gospels.

This morning's gospel lesson starts at only the 21st verse of the 1st chapter. But in the 20 verses prior we have heard John the Baptist proclaim prepare the way of the Lord, Jesus has been baptized, then tempted in the wilderness and then the first disciples have been called. That is compact writing!

Today's gospel lesson is also jam packed. Jesus teaches at the synagogue in Capernaum as one who has authority. A man approaches, full of an unclean spirit. The spirit taunts Jesus. Jesus rebukes the spirit and calls the spirit out. The crowd is amazed at both the teaching and the healing and Jesus' fame spreads.

Jesus teaches with authority and the unclean spirit taunts him. What does this mean to us in our times when the phrase "fake news" has entered our regular conversation?

Jesus is not just any self-proclaimed prophet. He is the holy one of God. Even his enemies recognize this. When the unclean spirit speaks out, Jesus calls out what is not right. He names the evil.

Martin Luther King Jr. said "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

What do these statements of Jesus and of Martin Luther King Jr. mean to us right now in the light of the happenings that have been taking place at the capitol in the United States?

The current pandemic has become the focus of much of our lives. The temptation is for us to be very inward looking, focused on our bubble, and our work, and our provinces' restrictions and numbers of cases and numbers of deaths.

But the realities of COVID call us to look out beyond ourselves to see the ways that the pandemic is pointing out and underlining disparities and structural inequities around the world and in Canada.

In Canada there are higher incidence rates of COVID in poorer and racialized communities. Many in those communities also experience more severe symptoms often due to underlying health conditions due to poverty.

Women in the workforce have faced more challenges than men have. They often bear the primary burden of childcare and homeschooling and have fallen farther behind in terms of the gendered pay gap.

There has also been an increase in domestic violence in Canada and around the world as lockdowns have increased both stress and proximity.

We may be concerned because there are worries about us not having enough vaccine to keep up with our capacity to vaccinate. Yet there are many developing countries that have still not received any vaccine. And recent news has shown that countries that are willing to pay above market value for vaccines are able to jump the queue and procure them faster.

When I think about these things and then look back on today's text, Jesus' actions cause me to ask these questions.

First what is the evil, what is the injustice, what are the evil spirits that need to be named and confronted around us?

Second, how can we, like Martin Luther King Jr. and like Jesus "stop being silent about things that matter." For to do this is to participate in the new life that Jesus promises us.

It is hard for us to know how and when to speak out. We would usually rather wait for things to change and problems to go away.

But speaking out to injustice, speaking out to lies, is part of Jesus' command to love our neighbours. It is a way we show our commitment to the common good. It is a way that we can follow the way of Jesus and live by his example.

I recently heard Archbishop Linda Nicholls talk about the moral injury that people are experiencing. So many things happening around us that break our understanding of what our moral code is. Even after the pandemic ends, we will need to continue working to address this moral injury. We will need to follow Jesus in speaking out against injustice, working for healing, and building up healthy community. But we are not alone.

In this time of Epiphany we begin by remembering the wise ones who followed a star to find the Christ child, the light of the world. In the season of Epiphany we reflect on how we are called to follow and share that light. Jesus continues to call to each of us to follow him and sends the spirit to nurture the gifts we have been given to work to build God's reign among us. It is the source of our light, our hope, our love and our strength.

Amen.