

Epiphany 4A
Peace, Seattle
January 28, 2018
Mark 1: 21-28

NO NODDING OFF THIS SABBATH

First came the river, the water, the Voice.

Then came the desert, the emptying, the testing.

Followed by the interrupting, the calling, the following.

And today, the teaching, the confronting, the exorcizing.

Jesus first venture in the public sphere takes place at a sacred time, (the Sabbath), in a sacred place, (the synagogue), and it sets the stage for all that will follow in Mark's gospel.

There's always plenty to unpack in these pithy and off' times visceral stories Mark tells us, but today I want to focus on two elements:

- First, the AUTHORITY with which Jesus confronts the forces that hold the man in bondage, and
- Second, the PUBLIC nature of his encounter.

SCENE ONE: If people came to worship that morning in Capernaum expecting the same old/same old well, they were up for a rude awakening!

The power and clarity of Jesus' proclamation astounded the congregation, for, Mark tells us, HE TAUGHT THEM AS ONE HAVING AUTHORITY AND NOT AS THE SCRIBES.

In other words, there's a force with which Jesus speaks that commands their attention.

I once had a parishioner named Ed who always sat in the same pew every week.

His spot was halfway down the right side, next to the aisle.

It didn't take me long to see that the reason Ed sat there was so he could put his elbow on the outer end of the pew and use it to prop up his head when he took a catnap each week during the sermon!

As Ed assumed his familiar position each week, and I watched his eyelids go to half-mast, I was often tempted to leave the pulpit, sneak up to him and startle him awake!...

But I never did...a fact I regret to this day!

Well, friends, there was no nodding off in the pew in the Capernaum synagogue that Sabbath!

The room was electric! The strength of his message, the power of his presence filled that space.

This NEW WORD Jesus speaks has them all standing on tiptoe;

- latches in their minds long closed suddenly spring open;
- linkages previously ignored usher in new possibilities;
- new space is created where healing can happen.¹

SCENE TWO: A man whose life is forfeit to some foul spirit finds Jesus in that holy place.

The powers of darkness have taken notice. These new spaces opening in the hearts and minds of Jesus' hearers—spaces of freedom, seeds of healing and communion—cannot be allowed to take root; they must be foreclosed.²

WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH US, JESUS OF NAZARETH? they snarl...

HAVE YOU COME TO DESTROY US? WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE!

¹ Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 312.

² Ibid.

There is an old theological perspective that suggests that once upon a time this world was forfeit to Satan; that it belongs to him. But Jesus will have none of that.

MUZZLE YOURSELF! he shouts. And the spirit convulses the man and comes out of him.

The Jesus we meet here is more than a teacher. He is a man who, through the power God has invested him with, can cast out unclean spirits, and restore lives.

The ancient worldview operating in the story that attributes illness to unclean spirits may be outdated medically. These days we might prefer the language of psychology rather than demon possession to diagnose the condition of the man in the synagogue.

Nevertheless, this scene powerfully dramatizes the forces that can wreck havoc within individuals, communities, and countries – mental illness, addiction, sexual abuse, racial hatred, ethnic cleansing.³

The point is, the gospel proclaims Jesus’ “authority” over even the most unclean of spirits that continue to take us over.

Not only does Jesus’ exorcism set the man free from bondage, providing a path for healing, it also restores a way for him to reconnect with his community.

Which brings us to the second point of this sermon—the public nature of Jesus’ actions.

The space where all this took place—the synagogue—is not private space, it’s PUBLIC SPACE. And as followers of Jesus, we too are called to bring our voices to the public square.

You might say that part of the reason we gather here each week is to try out faithful words and actions; to try on graceful convictions and affirmations that we can take with us when we leave this place and put to work in the public spaces we inhabit during the week.

Some interpreters see in this story overtones about the demonic nature of the empire of Rome—how it infiltrated every nook and cranny of one’s existence, make demands that touched every part of one’s life; applied constant pressure and threats, leaving one no place to hide, foreclosing on every option but compliance to its will.

“The Prince of Darkness,” writes Walter Brueggemann, “tries frantically to keep the world closed so that we can be administered.”⁴

In his first public act of ministry Jesus deals with his adversary opening and directly. His words and his actions are totally congruent; the lines are drawn and the battle is joined.

This battle continues today. And as people apprenticed to Jesus and to his way of acting and loving and being in community, we are called to bring our passion for what is just and right and true—for what serves the common good—into the public square.

Christ calls us to a way of living which will not be foreclosed upon by the malevolent forces at work in the world, whether those forces are state sanctioned or not.

³ See Cynthia Kittridge’s article @ WorkingPreacher.org: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3535

⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, p. 11.

Our Lord gave us this vocation when we were baptized, and hands it to us again every time we hear the words DO THIS FOR THE REMEMBRANCE OF ME.

One of the things we'll decide downstairs today is whether we want to formalize our public calling to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God," by becoming an advocating congregation aligned with Faith Action Network. The decision is an important one.

There's a whole lot at stake in the nation and world we're living in, and we are not called to be bystanders. I hope we have a thorough and thoughtful conversation as we decide.

Last Friday I was listening to the BBC when I heard a story of resistance that was truly remarkable. The story was about the rebuilding that's begun in recent months in the Iraqi city of Mosul, now that it's been taken back from ISIS control.

The reporter told the story of one man, a musician, who is determined to contribute in his own unique way to the rebuilding of his community in the war's aftermath.

Music, you see, was outlawed when ISIS took over the city. Despite this, the man turned to music as a form of protest when ISIS invaded his neighborhood—he went to his rooftop and furiously played out his fear and anger on the strings of his fiddle.

To the neighbors who warned him he would surely be killed if he continued, he responded: Without music my soul would be dead anyway.

Somehow, the man survived the ISIS occupation, and now as his city emerges from its former bondage, he's determined to build community in his neighborhood and city by starting an orchestra.

Sisters and brothers, our voices—yours and mine—are instruments in God's mission.

Through the power of the Spirit within us, we strive to join and lift our voices with those of other faithful people, for the sake of the world God so loves.

Amen.