

There's a word that the author of Mark's gospel uses over and over again—immediately. English translators, in an effort to make his language easier on our ears, often leave it out. As they do in this passage. But, as we read through Mark this year, consider that the word “immediately” is providing a drumbeat through this text. Mark wants to make sure we know that time is moving. Time is marching, and quickly, toward the conclusion of this story. Jesus is marching through this Gospel, with no time for dillydallying. When we hear Mark say “immediately”, it should call us back to the moment at hand. It should remind us that following Jesus, becoming people who fish for people, isn't about something that will happen sometime in the distant future. It is about right now. This very moment.

The newly appointed disciples have just left their nets by the shore when, immediately, they go to Capernaum. Not a big commute. It is town very near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And the Sabbath arrives, so Jesus enters the synagogue and teaches. On behalf of all teachers everywhere, let me express my dismay that Mark does not record Jesus' lesson plans from his synagogue teaching. Because the congregation was astounded at his teaching. Just what all teachers everywhere are aiming for. Leaving the crowds
ASTOUNDED!

But, in the middle of this astounding teaching, immediately a man with an unclean spirit appears, interrupting the lesson. “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.” We could get hung up on what it means for this man to have an unclean spirit. But we won't. Because I don't have an explanation. And Jesus doesn't call his disciples to gather around the bedside and make a diagnosis either.

But remember what has already happened in this first chapter of the gospel—the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended, until it landed on Jesus. So, Jesus, the man with the Holy Spirit is now, a few verses later, *immediately*, engaging a man with an unclean, or unholy Spirit.

The heavens have been opened and the battle that is being waged is nothing less than cosmic. From the beginning of Mark's gospel, it is apparent that the demonic, the unclean spirits, are on their way out. The hold and authority they have had in the world is coming to an end. The beginning of the Good News!

So, this possessed man speaks to Jesus. And notice what he says, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” So the first voice in Mark's gospel who proclaims Jesus' identity is God's voice at Jesus' baptism. The second voice to proclaim it is an unclean spirit. Even the demonic realm knows and proclaims Jesus' identity. What will become clear to the human characters (or at least to some of them) by the end of the gospel is immediately known by the cosmic realm at the beginning.

But Jesus silences this Spirit and commands it to leave the man. Because when you are possessed by unclean spirits, you are not free to live the life to which you have been called by God. And Jesus' call is to freedom, and wholeness and new life.

We had an encounter here at Southminster this past week that I saw in new ways because of this text. Last week, as the New Member class was ending, a man named Tim showed up at the church seeking help. He asked if we had clothing vouchers so he could get another set of clothes. He appeared to be carrying all of his possessions on his back. I was actually in another part of the building when he arrived, but by the time I came downstairs and met him, he'd been given some cookies we had left over from the class and people were talking with him about places he could go for shelter. Our congregation does provide gas vouchers to people, but we don't have clothes laying around. So, some of the people who

had met and welcomed Tim told him they would get him a set of clothes and leave them at the church for him in the morning. And they did. And he came back in the morning, changed his clothes and went off. And then he came back that afternoon and I saw him visiting with Martin, who was waiting for the personnel committee meeting to start. Tim wanted to want to warm up and be out of the cold.

There was no exorcism performed on Tim, per se. But what happened was that people from this congregation looked past his unclean spirit and asked him his name. They treated him with dignity and hospitality and grace. And, truthfully, whatever demons he has that led to his homeless status, are probably still in effect. The calling out of demons, in this passage, at least, is what Jesus does. We don't have his authority.

But we have been called by Jesus to become people who fish for people. So that means that when we encounter people who are burdened by demons of homelessness, as Tim is, we greet them as children of God and set about the work of bringing them into the knowledge of God's love in Christ.

And here's the problem. It is awkward and uncomfortable. Tim is a very nice guy, but this church building and staff are not set up to have people wandering through the building all day. There are very real and legitimate concerns when Mary is by herself in the building for a few hours each day.

I don't think Tim came back to cause problems. I believe Tim came back because people greeted him with dignity and grace. Because he was treated like a beloved child of God. So, there are consequences for us to consider as we follow God's call.

One commentator on this passage sums it up this way. We are invited to follow Jesus into "Mark's world of Jesus walking around possessed by the power of the Spirit of God. In such a world, you either go with him and help him create the holy chaos he's creating or you find a way to do everything you can to stop him so you can get your people back in line."¹

If we take seriously Jesus' command to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of people", we are walking into holy chaos.

Perhaps this scene with the unclean spirit *is* the teaching of Jesus that astounded the crowd. Mark doesn't tell us, so it is possible that Jesus had preached an amazing sermon before this encounter, but I suspect that it was what Jesus did, more than what he said, that left the crowds astounded. "What is this?", the crowds ask. "A new teaching—with authority!"

And while words do matter, I hope we'll pay attention to how much more loudly our actions speak. Had Jesus just spoken a message of grace and inclusion but then told the man to leave the synagogue because unclean people weren't welcome there, nobody would have been astounded. His teaching would have been forgotten.

One of my favorite quotes is by St. Francis of Assisi, who said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

That's what happened here this week. It is one thing to say that we believe that every person we meet is a beloved child of God. It is a different thing, entirely, to treat each person we meet as a beloved child of God. It is Holy Chaos!

Jesus' actions and authority were a new teaching for the world. And the news of his actions immediately spread throughout the region of Galilee, Mark tells us. That news is still spreading, friends. We have a community that needs to hear that news. Not because we need

¹ Brian K Blount and Gary W. Charles, Preaching Mark in Two Voices (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) p. 33.

Authority
Mark 1:21-28

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our church to be bigger. Not because we think that the state of their salvation is our job. But we have good news to share because we believe that when Jesus acts, things happen. We have good news to share because the unclean and unholy realm no longer has the final say. In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to walk out into our neighborhood, sharing Christ's Holy Chaos, and giving people Hope for the future and Hope for today. Immediately. Amen.