

February 1, 2015
4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
Mark 1:21-28

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

The Rev. Albert Aymer, who was academic dean of Drew Theological School when I attended seminary there, was fond of opening his classes with the question:

“SO – WHAT’S THE GOOD NEWS?”

“What IS the good news?” How would YOU answer that question?

The gospel writer Mark is eager to show his readers the uniqueness of the good news revealed in Jesus. In his book, “Meeting God in Mark”, Rowan Williams notes that our word “gospel”, ‘*euangelion*’ in N.T. Greek, is a political reference. Williams writes:

“ ‘*Euangelion*’, literally means ‘a bit of good news’ or ‘a pleasing message’, and was the word you would have used in the ancient world as the routine official designation of an important public announcement. A ‘*euangelion*’ was a press release from the Buckingham Palace of the day announcing a significant event of public interest: the emperor’s son had got engaged or received a service award, the princess had had a baby, an opposing army had been defeated. Something had happened to be glad about; but, a bit more than that, the something that had happened was likely in some way, great or small, to change things in public life. A *euangelion*, a ‘gospel’, a good message is a message about something that alters the climate in which people live, changing the politics and the possibilities. It transforms the landscape of social life”.

And so Mark writes: ***Jesus came proclaiming the good news of God, saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”***. In other words, Mark gives us notice right up front that this book is going to be about a regime change. God is directly taking over.

It’s not too surprising then, that after Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him in fishing for people, the first glimpse of “good news” we get in Mark’s account, happens in church, but in a most unexpected way. We would expect the synagogue, a place of reverence and sacred tradition, to be about the business of

teaching and learning and prayer. But as Jesus is teaching, right there in the middle of church on the Sabbath, there is suddenly a bit of a commotion. A man with an *unclean spirit* calls 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.”** The unclean spirit recognizes the truth of who Jesus is, and knows it has met its match, and is about to be sent packing. Jesus has come in person, filled with God’s power to set people free from every power that oppresses, enslaves, diminishes, and isolates.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that in a holy place and at a holy time – in the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus meets his first challenge since being tempted by Satan in the wilderness? And the first of 18 miracles Jesus does, according to Mark’s gospel, is to cast out an unclean spirit. And as it happens with any major shift in power, it looks like liberation for some, and upset and radical change in the status quo for others.

Demon possession and exorcism can seem archaic to our 21st century ears, conditioned and guided as we are by the sophistication of advanced science and technology. Whatever we might think about demons and exorcism, there can be no doubt that there are forces that actively oppose what God desires for this world, and this is Mark’s point. Those forces, those unclean spirits, take an infinite variety of forms. And in whatever form they appear, they rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for us. Rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.

The early church took evil and the forces that oppose God very seriously. For at least the first 2 centuries as the church developed, it was the practice in some parts of the church to offer prayers of exorcism over a candidate for baptism 3x before he was baptized (and the norm was adult baptism by immersion, with a long period of preparation beforehand). This lends a fresh understanding to our practice of anointing with chrism at baptism, when the priest says, **“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”** In other words, evil forces have been cast out. This moment marks a regime change, a new beginning, in the life of the

baptized. The power and love of God will now forever be the primary force at work in this person's life.

And so the Spirit nudges us to continue learning that a crucial part of claiming and sinking our spiritual roots deeper into the good news of Jesus' way, includes truth-telling, which sometimes looks and feels to us like bad news. But if we're honest, we have to admit the unclean spirits are alive and well, aren't they? We can easily point to evil acts and atrocities in our nation and world, happening every day, as well as throughout history. And while we do indeed, live as Christ's own, already completely redeemed people, the unclean spirits continue to show up and torment us, our faith communities and religious institutions, our schools, neighborhoods, governments and nations. And as unclean spirits always do, they hold us captive, preventing us from becoming all that God intends for us to be – holy people, growing deeper in love with God, people with a growing capacity to be channels of God's healing and liberating love in the world.

The first step in our being liberated from the unclean spirits, the first step to healing and wholeness is to recognize and name them - in ourselves, in our families, our churches, and in our social institutions. In J.K. Rowling's popular Harry Potter books, the evil force, the villain who is out to destroy Harry, is Lord Voldemort. He is an egomaniac and power hungry. He is a scheming and violent wizard, and he means to take over the world by whatever means necessary. But the people are afraid to even speak his name, so when Voldemort comes up in their conversation with each other, they lower their voices and refer to him as **"He Who Must Not Be Named"**. The people in Harry's world know there are bad things afoot, but they live in fear of admitting this and naming its source. Except that is, for young Harry, whose courageous life Voldemort is intent on ending. Harry is the one willing to openly speak Voldemort's name.

The truth is that naming the unclean spirits takes away their power to create distraction, chaos, discord, and un-health in us, and in our relationships with God and others.

The unclean spirits are unique to each of us, and we probably have more familiarity with them than we might imagine. Have you ever been “possessed” by anger at someone that has led you to say and do things you regret? Or maybe you’ve been envious of someone else’s success or achievement and you find yourself pointing out their flaws, making little verbal “digs” about them? For some of us the unclean spirit comes in the form of fear, or despair; of pride, or prejudice; of greed or perfectionism. For yet others, the unclean spirit comes in the form of an addiction to substances or other life-destroying behaviors and compulsions. The unclean spirit of racism is still firmly entrenched in the fabric of our nation. And we might even be reminded again, on this day when the Super Bowl is played, that the unclean spirits are alive and well in families experiencing domestic violence. We all have had these experiences, haven’t we, of feeling possessed by something that is so clearly not the Spirit of God blessing us to be a blessing to others?

So hear Mark’s message again: Jesus continues to be in the business of freeing us from those powers which seek to rob us of all God hopes and intends for us. God’s desire is to lead us and love us into wholeness and holiness. But how does that happen?

Sometimes it is as dramatic as in Mark’s story. Some people have sudden and dramatic encounters with the Lord of grace and mercy. Sometimes the road to healing and restoration takes both time and the company of others. It may come through pastoral visits, or conversation with a trusted counselor or friend, or through the steady support of a grief group or an AA/12-step group, or a prayer or Bible study group. The healing ministry which has been developing here at St. Andrew’s is a sign, and a vehicle of God’s power and desire to bring healing and wholeness. God is at work in all these ways and so many more to free us from the unclean spirits that still possess us.

So – the final take-away question to ponder in the coming week is this: ***How much more of God’s grace do I want to experience in my life, and in the life of this congregation?*** Pray for the courage to think about this, and perhaps begin honest and

faithful conversation about it with one other person. Consider what a next step might be for you to open yourself more fully to experience God's liberating and healing grace. Be assured that as we lean more fully into the heart of Christ, we WILL see new life appearing, because we serve a ***living and liberating, boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, death-defying Lord***. Watch for that new life, because it will appear when you least expect it. Watch for it, because God intends that each of us be freed in order to become the bearers and sharers of that Good and Life-giving News, for the very sake of this world God loves. May it be so! Amen.

