

Year B Proper 4 2024 Teachings and Transformations Mark 1 vv21 to 28

The people in the synagogue with Jesus this morning watch him rid a demon-possessed man of the demon and to this they say, “What is this? A new teaching...with authority.” A new *teaching*, really? They’ve just witnessed an exorcism, the man convulsing and crying loudly, and they say, “Ooh...a new teaching.” Other than on t.v, none of us has likely seen an exorcism. But we probably have witnessed other events – someone choking, maybe someone having a seizure, perhaps a toddler having a tantrum in the grocery store. These episodes leave a mark on us emotionally – they disturb and distress us. And, when we also witness the positive resolution of the episode – the paramedics arriving and stabilizing the person, the choking or seizure ending, or the parent of the toddler successfully quieting the distraught child – I am quite sure that our reaction is not, “Wow, a new teaching...and with authority.” Yet that is what the people witnessing Jesus’ exorcism say in response. What are we missing?

Let’s back up and notice that Mark has told us Jesus was in the synagogue teaching. He doesn’t tell us today what Jesus was teaching but he doesn’t need to. We discovered last week what Jesus proclaimed: The kingdom of God is here, he calls out. I bring the kingdom, he declares. Turn to God and believe this good news! The people listening to him in the synagogue are astonished. He teaches with authority, they say, unlike the way the scribes teach. As Tom Long puts it: “Rather than leaving the congregation bewildered by spending his time parsing Hebrew sentences, splitting theological hairs, and quoting fifteen other rabbis, each quoting someone else, Jesus simply looked the people in the eye and preached from the heart” (Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p.85).

The kingdom is here. The people know the ramifications of those four little words. Their sacred teachings, such as the psalms that they sing, describe God's kingdom in detail. Perhaps that very morning they sang what we call Psalm 146 that assures them, in God's kingdom God gives justice to the oppressed, food to those who hunger. God sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind. He lifts up those who are bowed down, loves the righteous, cares for the stranger, sustains the orphan and widow, and puts an end to all wickedness. And Jesus, with authority, is declaring that this is what he is bringing about. It's here, he says. The time is now. And all you must do is turn to God and believe this. That certainly is astonishing. What a message of good news. They sure would want to believe it to be true. They've been yearning for this for a very long time. But would they believe it to be true?

But they don't have any time to give the matter some thought because, immediately, there is a possessed man crying out in their midst: "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 *people* may not have decided yet upon Jesus' identity and ability to bring the kingdom but the unclean spirits have. Here, and throughout Mark's Gospel, they name him as the Son of God and they know his coming means their ending.

Jesus wastes no time in taking care of business. He silences the unclean spirit and commands him to come out of the man. With a little bit of kicking and screaming, that's exactly what the unclean spirit does. "A new teaching!" the people excitedly declare and, perhaps, this is exactly the right response. They have just witnessed Jesus performing an exorcism and they name it a new teaching.

The kingdom is here, Jesus has been telling them. I bring the kingdom of God, he has been claiming. And before they had a chance to think about whether or not they believed his teachings to be true, they *saw* them to be true. Yes, they saw an exorcism but they witnessed the inbreaking of God's kingdom in all its fullness. He frees the prisoners, lifts up the bowed down, cares for the stranger, puts an end to all wickedness. It was unfolding in front of them: It's true, they were thinking, the kingdom is here, he is bringing the kingdom, even the unclean spirits obey him!

The people in the synagogue that day, they were transformed by what they experienced. Tom Long tells a story of a high school English class:

The subject was modern drama, and the exercise was a class reading of the script of Frank Gilroy's "The Subject Was Roses." The reading moved toward the final scene, one in which a young man named Timmy is leaving home and attempting to say farewell to John, his stubborn and unfeeling father. The readers were dutiful and lifeless. Students glanced at their watches, waiting for the liberation of the bell. A boy and girl in the back of the class exchanged notes. Another boy, bored, looked out the window at the Vice Principal making his way toward the building from the parking lot.

Timmy's lines call for him to say to his father that he has had a dream the night before, a dream he has dreamed many times. In the dream he is told that his father is dead, and, when he hears this news, he runs into the street crying. Someone stops him and asks why he is crying, and he says that he is crying because his father is dead and his father never said he loved him. The boy reading Timmy's part faltered on these lines, his voice taking on a strange timbre. The boy lifted his eyes from the script and looked directly at the teacher. "My father has never said that either," he whispered.

Suddenly the class was attentive. An electric silence filled the room. All eyes were on the teacher, who motioned for the reading to continue. The boy looked again at the page and hoarsely read the next line:

[All the while his father is insisting, "I don't know what you're talking about, son," Timmy tells his father he loves him. "I love you, Pop," he says. "I love you."

The teacher was now standing by the boy, his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. As the teacher held the boy close to him, first one member of the class, then another, spoke quietly and thoughtfully of the difficulty and of the healing power of loving another, even when that love cannot be returned. When the students left the class that day, they left neither bored nor merely informed, but changed. What is this? A new teaching? (Long, pp.87-88).

What they experienced was teaching that was an event so powerful that it transformed them. We long for this too: an event that doesn't just entertain, a truth which does not merely set us thinking, but sets us free (adapted, p.89). That is what happened in the synagogue today. An event, startling in its significance, happened before the eyes of the amazed congregation. "The demonic powers were subdued. A human life was restored. Jesus was shown to be Lord over all that seeks to spoil and destroy. And the congregation knew that this was not an event merely for the watching. They could not fold their bulletins after the [grace] and walk away. This event," says Tom Long, was not a mere spectacle, but a lasting command. This event contained a truth which made a claim on their lives. Event and wisdom were bonded together that day. What is this? A new teaching!"

Teaching and event so powerful it transforms. The truth of the teaching *experienced in* the event. This is our experience every time we gather together to

worship. Drawn by the Holy Spirit, gathered in the presence of God, hearing the teachings of Jesus: an event so powerful it transforms. Immersed in our story – through word, image, action, and symbol – immersed in our story we become our story. The kingdom is here! Turn to God and believe this good news!

We meet with resistance though. In the world around us and, just as in the synagogue, there is resistance in the Church. Perhaps thoughts of chores to be done at home distract from the prayers. Maybe you're thinking the preacher is going on too long and you're no longer paying attention. There are more serious resistances: the world puts demands on our time and tells us to push church down the priority ladder. Fear of letting go of ourselves and fear of the unknown stops us from saying, "not my will but yours, Lord". Telling God to lead us may head us down paths that are inconvenient and uncomfortable and frighteningly unfamiliar. Spending time in reflection to identify the resistances is an important undertaking for each of us. Life in God's kingdom is currently a life full of resistance but the One with the authority and power that even demons obey him is the One who meets us here to strengthen us and sustain us, to free us from the ties that bind, to love us beyond all fathoming. When we lose ourselves in the transformative power of our worship, we, like those in the synagogue, we will be changed, we will be amazed. And we know what happens when we are amazed: "And immediately his fame began to spread around the surrounding region." So, let's be amazed.