

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 28, 2024 – 4 Epiphany
Mark 1: 21-28
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As I mentioned last week, many of our Sunday morning Gospel readings this year will be from the Gospel of Mark. I gave you some background information about this Gospel last week, and today I want to add a bit more.

Though it is not the first book of the New Testament, Mark is the oldest of the Gospels. It was the first thing of its kind, a narrative of the Good News of Jesus Christ, an account of his ministry and teaching, his death and resurrection. Not much is known about Mark. He was a Christian, but we do not know whether he was a Jew or a Gentile. He probably knew people who knew Jesus. The Gospel mentions Alexander and Rufus, the sons of Simon of Cyrene, the man who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross. It is likely that Alexander and Rufus had known Jesus and that they were members of Mark's community of followers of Jesus.

Mark's Gospel makes rich use of the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament. It is an oral narrative. Few people could read and write at that time, so the Gospel was meant to be read aloud in one sitting, which would have taken about an hour and a half in Greek. The Gospel is action packed. The phrase "and immediately" is used over and over again.

Mark's Gospel portrays a more human and vulnerable Jesus than the other Gospels do. This Gospel stresses both Jesus' remarkable healing power and the persecution he experienced for following the way of God – both are true and equally important. He is the Messiah and he experiences suffering and death. This understanding of God in terms of suffering love is extremely important to Christians, especially to followers of Jesus who themselves suffer deeply. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell shortly before the Nazis killed him, "only the suffering God can help" (Letters and Papers from Prison).

The opening line of Mark's Gospel is "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). The Greek word translated "good news" or "gospel" does not refer to just any kind of good news. It refers more specifically to news of a military victory, something like "good news of victory from the battlefield."

And Mark's Gospel deals with several levels of conflict. There is cosmic conflict, the conflict between God and Satan as well as Satan's representatives, the demons and unclean spirits. In Mark's Gospel the cosmic conflict started at Jesus' baptism, the moment after God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Immediately Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was "tempted by Satan" for forty days. There is also conflict between Jesus and the political, social, and religious establishment. And finally, there is conflict between Jesus and his disciples. We will see all these types of conflict in the lessons we read this year. This morning's passage primarily concerns conflict between God and Jesus on one hand and Satan and the unclean spirit on the other.

One last fact about Mark's Gospel that I think is relevant to the passage we just heard. The first words Jesus speaks in this Gospel – and he speaks them after his time of temptation in the wilderness, when he began his ministry in Galilee – are these: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). In Jesus God's kingdom or the reign of God has come near. This is good news for some, but not good news for the enemies of God. Do you see how Jesus' presence provoked God's adversaries?

In the first century synagogues were probably just coming into existence as local Jewish centers of meeting, study, and worship. It was the Sabbath, the day set aside by Jewish law for study and worship. Jesus and his disciples observed the Sabbath. They went to the synagogue, and Jesus “taught [the people] as one having authority” (Mark 1:22).

Suddenly a man disrupts Jesus. This man shouldn’t have even been allowed in the synagogue because he had “an unclean spirit.” But there he was, disrupting Jesus’ teaching. He cries 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.” Remember that for Mark and his hearers this encounter is between God and Satan, Jesus and Satan’s evil representative, the unclean spirit who had taken possession of the man. The unclean spirit recognized Jesus for who he was – the Holy One of God – and recognized that Jesus had come to destroy the power of evil. Jesus performs an exorcism. He rebukes the unclean spirit: “Be silent, and come out of him!” By casting out the demon Jesus healed the man, a man whose condition had put him outside of the synagogue and his community.

At the very beginning of his Gospel Mark thus highlights many of the most important aspects of Jesus’ ministry. He was a teacher who taught with authority, the kind of authority which came from God. He was a healer who had the power to cast out demons as well as cure diseases. Jesus very often reached out to those whose illnesses made them religious and social outcasts. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus’ fame spread, and many came to him to hear his teaching and to be healed. But as we know, trouble would come, and the more clearly Jesus revealed his identity and the nature of God’s work in the world, the worse the trouble would be, ending in his crucifixion.

A word about the “unclean spirit.” Many people read accounts like this one and conclude that the term is used for what we would now call physical or mental illnesses. Jesus healed a young man who had epilepsy by rebuking “the unclean spirit,” for example (Mark 9:17-27). And perhaps the wild, violent man who lived in the tombs was schizophrenic rather than “possessed.” I agree that there are 21st century explanations for some of the infirmities Jesus healed that could not be understood in his day. But it is also my opinion that there are evil forces in this world that cannot be explained by psychopathology and disease. I believe that these forces can and do work through people.

In my relatively long life, beginning when I was a young person, I have seen, known, and felt evil forces manifested in human beings. I have seen, known, and felt spirits of malice, mockery, envy and jealousy, untruth and lies. I have suffered from the destruction that a selfish will to power can cause others. When people give themselves over to such spirits, they put their souls in danger, and they are a danger to others. You may have encountered these and other evil forces in the course of your lives. I believe it can be worthwhile to see and name the unclean spirits, as Jesus often did. We do not have his authority over evil, but when we see evil clearly and name it, we do have a measure of control over its power in ourselves. Seeing evil clearly, we can resist evil, with God’s help.

The man with the unclean spirit said to Jesus, “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.” As I look back on my experiences in life and wonder about the causes of some of the most painful of them, and as I see what happens in the lives of other people I have known or know about, I have come to the conclusion that goodness and innocence and “godliness” can and do provoke evil. This is central to the Christian story. Jesus did nothing but good but drew to himself the forces of hatred and destruction. Those who love God have good reason to pray “deliver us from evil.” God has won and is winning and will win the battle with evil, no matter how much power evil has. But until God’s reign is established forever, until God’s dream for the world and for humanity is reality, let us pray that Jesus will help us and guide us and keep us safe, through the power and love of God. Amen.