

“What’s Your Business?”

January 31, 2021

Good News for a New Year series – Livestream

Mark’s Gospel is interesting; it plunges us into Jesus’ ministry. Everything happens quickly. It’s like Mark is out of breath telling us everything he wants us to know. We move from Jesus coming to be baptized, then being tempted in the desert, then calling disciples to follow, and now bursting on the public scene. Mark tells us who Jesus is right away – Messiah, Son of God, the Lord. There’s no doubt about the Good News Mark wants to share. And when Jesus begins his public ministry, he goes big – straight into the synagogue where the people were gathered to learn on the Sabbath.

Mark, the Gospel writer, is somewhat of a mystery, although scholars believe he’s closely connected with the disciple, Peter. And there’s general agreement that Mark’s Gospel is the earliest - probably written around 70 AD – the year that the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The politics of the time make it ripe for uncertainty, confusion, and fear, which may explain the pace of the Gospel – how quickly it moves from one scene to another to give us the facts about Jesus. Mark is showing us that Jesus’ authority is real – that Jesus is who Mark says he is – the Messiah, the Lord.

Mark tells a story within a story. Jesus is teaching, and the big thing is that he teaches with authority. Jesus is different from the scribes. Something new is going on. And suddenly a man with an unclean spirit confronts him and says, “What’s your business? Why are you here? Have you come to destroy us – Jesus – Holy One?” The unclean spirit knows who Jesus is – the Holy One of God. The question isn’t to challenge Jesus, but to acknowledge his authority and holiness because the unclean spirit already knows that Jesus is more powerful.

It’s important to say here that we’re not clear on exactly what a “unclean spirit” means, but many scholars agree that it signifies a chronic health condition – possibly mental illness. To be clear, when we read Scripture, we’re in a different time and place with different ways of explaining why things are the way they are. I’m sure we have some different questions and ideas when it comes to evil and evil spirits.

Simply put, an unclean spirit was something that brought harm to someone – alienation and destruction – and working against God’s intention for wholeness and salvation. We may not believe in unclean spirits in the same way the people of Jesus’ time did, but that doesn’t mean that evil is gone. The presence of evil is real, and we’re still called to stand against it. It shows us in those baptismal vows we go back to time

and again. *Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?* Sometimes it's inside of us; sometimes it's outside of us. Either way, we're called to stand against evil.

Jesus performs an exorcism – setting the man from what holds him in bondage, restoring him. In Jesus' time, both physical and mental health struggles pushed people to the margins. This man would've pushed him to the outside of the community. It's a wonder that he's in the synagogue at all!

Illness meant isolation, and we know the difficulty of isolation probably more now than ever. In the past year, that's become clearer. But isolation can be a reality for people who struggle whether it's depression, anxiety, dementia, or other conditions – and for their caregivers. It's difficult to ask for help and even to admit it. It's hard to trust others. It's hard to plan for the unknown.

Jesus releases this man from what kept him outside of the community. In the same spirit that Jesus had as he went around healing and restoring people into community, we seek healing and hope for all people. That's who we are as followers of Christ. We want to offer safe space, spiritual support, and caring community for those who struggle with illness – whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Faith in Jesus Christ has a part to play, and so does quality healthcare. Healing comes from God, and God works through many channels to bring healing and wholeness. But this story reminds me that we're called to stamp out the stigma around mental health.

I'm grateful for more conversation about it, but there is so much to understand and be aware of. Mental health struggles are real, and all of us have our own experiences or connections to loved ones who live with them every day. We may not fully understand what others deal with, but if we follow Jesus, we're called to offer compassion and care in his name.

Beyond thinking about offering compassion and care to others, this healing story challenges us to consider what it is that holds us, binds us, and keeps us from living wholly. We struggle to think about it for ourselves, reserving talk of evil for the most reprehensible things around us, but evil in the world is a real thing. Sin is a real thing. The struggles we have are real. Whatever seeks to demean and destroy, anything that sabotages God's loving and caring work requires healing and hope.

This encounter in the synagogue reminds us that God cares deeply about our struggles and responds to them. It's interesting that the unclean spirit speaks out, and Jesus responds. God knows that we sometimes feel helpless against all that we're up against. We feel helpless to overcome sin in our lives. We feel helpless to stand against evil in the world. But God doesn't leave us on our own. We worship a power and a presence greater than all that is broken around us and within us. God brings healing in

many ways, including through the community of faith, the care we can offer, and the gifts that we can give and receive from each other.

Back to our story within a story. Mark is walking us through a day in the life of Jesus – a Sabbath day, especially showing us Jesus’ authority to teach and heal. The issue of authority is important in Mark—who has it and how they use it; it’s central to Jesus’ ministry. He’s different than the scribes who use the Torah to back up their teaching. His words and actions carry an authority that no one has ever seen before. It’s not given to him by others, but it’s a part of him to the core.

Jesus’ authority comes from God—and he uses it to heal those ailing in body, mind, and spirit, to help the hurting, to give life to those who couldn’t see anything but death, and restore people to community. His authority is different; it’s new. His goal is to show the Kingdom of God right now. He reaches out to the overlooked, those who are forgotten about, rejected, ignored, brokenhearted, wounded, and uncared for. They are not outside of God’s reach. They are not outside of God’s love.

So Jesus’ ministry of healing embodies what the Good News is. Mark’s focus is on what Jesus does – not so much on what he says. He embodies his message; he doesn’t simply talk about healing, but heals! Someone wrote: “Wherever Christ comes, he comes to do good.” And that’s our call as those who follow him – to do good in his name.

Jesus spreads Good News with authority from God. Mark tells us where it ultimately leads - not to popularity and fame, though there’s some of that, but to suffering and death on the cross.

And yet it’s still Good News: Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah, Son of God, the Holy One who cares about those who suffer. Jesus is Suffering Son of God who shows us how much God loves us and walks with us in suffering and struggle.

Friends, we are on a journey with Jesus – a daily journey. Today you may be full of joy or you may be struggling. We worship together to know God’s healing and wholeness, God’s peace and comfort – to remember it, claim it, reclaim it, and proclaim it. We pray for ourselves and for others because the journey isn’t easy to make. We hope for and remember the compassion that Jesus had for those who came to him. We trust in his authority that’s beyond anything of this world.

We look to a new authority for peace and mercy, no matter what messages we hear around us. We may share some of the same struggles of Mark’s community. When I read about uncertainty, fear, confusion that surrounded Mark’s Gospel, I could relate. We continue to pray for healing and for this pandemic to end. We carry struggles that only we know – and God knows, too. And God cares and has authority over it all. Jesus comes to do good and calls us to do the same.

What's your business? What do you want with us? Jesus' business is transformation if we're willing to let him work in us and work on us. Jesus' business is healing and wholeness - salvation and peace - if we're willing to open our hearts to his love. Jesus' business is helping us see what we need to see clearly about ourselves - even the uncomfortable pieces and parts – whatever keeps us from wholeness - so that we grow and learn and know the joy of his salvation. His business is helping us to become more like him - disciples of the Lord who share in his ministry. Jesus will give those who follow him the authority to teach and heal.

As Jesus changes people, systems change, too. And he calls us to participate in those bigger changes – to bring justice, to bring healing. And so much of it is based in care, compassion, justice, liberation, doing good in his name, remembering whom we follow.

The message is too good to keep to ourselves—too good not to share. I wonder what happened to this man. Where did he go? What did people say? What did he say about Jesus and about healing?

Jesus has authority to bring help and healing. Jesus is loving. And Jesus wants to share his power and love with you and me – and even with the whole world.

I invite us today to consider if there are specific prayers for which you desire healing. You can contact me if there's a time you want to meet and share those healing prayers. Sharing those prayers are powerful times to acknowledge that God is with us and cares about our struggles – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. That's God's business.

God offers us peace of mind and heart. What's God's business? To love and care, to bring and wholeness.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray...