FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*New & Improved!* Mark 1:21-28

This morning’s sermon title comes from my memory of a lot of the hucksterism in advertising from the 1960’s and 70’s. Most of us in this church remember those days. For those of you who do not, it was a time of rapid change. Calling something “new & improved” was a commonly used way of attracting attention and (hopefully) convincing the American public, and this was uniquely American, to purchase whatever was being offered for sale.

We have rapid change today too, but fifty or sixty years ago things were just starting to speed up, and it was very disorienting. Most of our parents did not take the change too well. I say this because it was also the era that gave rise to the expression, can you think of what it is - *anybody*: “generation gap.” The people who used the term most were usually younger, and they usually uttered the term in voices filled with frustration and annoyance.

In those days, it felt like everything was “New & Improved!”—which, when you actually think about it is an oxymoron. How can something that is *new* be *improved*? If something is ***new*** (i.e., has not existed previously), it cannot be ***improved***. And vice versa.

This mental detour into huckster advertising and generation gaps came to me as I was studying the passage we heard from the gospel of Mark. In it, Jesus is what is “new & improved”—the very people he preaches for in this passage declare it themselves. They look at him with wonder and awe. *“He teaches as one with authority*,*”* they claim.

It would have been helpful if Mark had told us what he said, or at least the Scripture he used. However, whatever he said, whatever part of Holy Scripture Jesus used, it seems obvious that Jesus did not exhibit the kind of scholarly mannerisms of other teachers. It sounds like he spoke without pointing to other sources or tradition to support this argument. Instead, he taught them from a place of truth and righteousness and courage, and he spoke these things with a kind of conviction and confidence that left an impression on his listeners.

This would have been enough. However, Jesus follows-up his words with an act of power. He casts out a demon from a man who also entered the synagogue that morning.

What is important to notice is that it is the demon who immediately recognizes Jesus. The demon in the man possessed even knows his name—Jesus of Nazareth. “You are the Holy One of God,” he proclaims. And he knows that Jesus has the power to destroy him [v. 24].

It is especially important to notice this as well as the fact that none of the calm, sane members of the congregation had recognized Jesus or who he was. They were amazed by him but had not connected his display of authority and power over the demon to anything other than a “new” teaching. So, they wonder and are mystified, but because they have not made the connection between Jesus’ power and the *source* of his power they have not come to faith.

One cannot help but wonder if “new & improved” was also known as the kind of hucksterism we know it to be today. Perhaps that is what kept that knowledge from them. There were other traveling teachers like Jesus who passed themselves off as “holy men.” So, perhaps the people in Capernaum were used to other strangers and their hubris.

To their credit, they are not *alienated* by Jesus’ newness. They were fascinated. So, far, Jesus’ newness has caused a disruption in their lives, but it is one that is bold and wonderful. You can tell that the words he said have penetrated their hearts, *and* they were able to recognize the goodness of the possessed man’s healing. The late Sen. John Lewis called this kind of thing, making “good trouble.” Apparently, this is a kind of “good trouble” the people in Capernaum were able to discern and accept without hesitation or complaint.

What happened in that synagogue on that morning is going to continue to happen in Jesus’ ministry. He will again stir up people and circumstances wherever he goes. He will disrupt and bring “good trouble” into the lives of many more people. He will do this in our lives, too, if we will let him, and that is at least one of the questions this passage asks of us: will we, too, recognize it when our status quo is disrupted with “good trouble?” Will we recognize moments of God’s genuine newness of life when they come into *our* lives?

Last week, I was listening to the radio as I drove to church and there was a discussion about the lawsuit - a group of young people—children—are bringing against our state department of transportation over greenhouse gas emissions.

I could tell I was *not* listening to Hawaii Public Radio because the radio personality and his sidekick were criticizing and mocking the lawsuit and the young people.

Aside from being hostile and obnoxious when talking about a group of *children* the radio personality was also completely ignorant and insensitive about the fear and the sincere anguish many young people have about the environment they are growing up in and will inherit. With the clarity of the young, they are doing what they can to get the adults who make the decisions to listen to their concerns and to care about their future, and the future of all children and the planet.

Mr. radio personality was also not terribly well read. This is not the first time children have turned to the courts to make their voices heard. *Business Insider’s* online journal published an article on September 2023 that reads like this, or so in part:

*Amid the escalating climate crisis,* [17-year-old Taliya] *Nishida and 13 other Hawaiian youth advocates sued the Hawaii Department of Transportation in 2022 over transportation-related greenhouse-gas emissions. The lawsuit is part of a growing international movement of young people taking climate action in the courts, including in [Montana, where a group of youth plaintiffs won a landmark lawsuit](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/14/us/montana-youth-climate-ruling.html" \t "_blank) in August that compels the state to* [*take climate change into account*](https://www.businessinsider.com/young-montana-residents-suing-state-over-fossil-fuels-climate-change-2023-6) *when considering fossil-fuel projects.*

In Montana people. Now I lived in Montana, as you know and to get those stall works to pride themselves on independence to listen to a group of children and for the children to actually win a lawsuit in that environment – That is something.

Now this is something “new & improved” that we can support. This is the kind of “good trouble” I would not mind having in my life.

The bad news is that it means being vigilant about the new things that come our way. Sometimes it will be no more than an advertiser’s hype. Other times, it is going to be the future calling to us away from life as we know it, calling us to new life. As Christians, we believe this is new life with Christ.

The difficult part is recognizing that God is like us, but also God is decidedly *not* like us—not at all. There is a wild otherness about God that will challenge us. God will even disrupt our lives in ways that are going to be uncomfortable.

Think about the people we heard about in the passage from Mark. I am sure they were hoping to have a nice, quiet Sabbath morning in their synagogue with their regular rabbi. Instead, a stranger stands up—where is the usual rabbi and his usual message about obeying the Law and tithing?

And then the stranger begins to speak, and we and they realize that his voice is finding a welcome home in our hearts. Who is this? What does this mean?

What indeed.

Friends today is the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—four weeks after the moment when the love of God was blessed and revealed to the world for the first time and for all time. Christ is in the world, like he was in the synagogue in Capernaum, and he is bringing the same wholeness and healing that he always has.

However, in the passage that was read for us this morning, Jesus was recognized only by the demon he exorcized from a tormented man. What is revealed to the demon, and to any others who are willing to courageously hear and see, is that judgement has come into the world.

Jesus of Nazareth, “the Holy One of God” is come and everything *is* going to be “new & improved.” That is our good news, as well as the fact that we are gathered here as a church family so that we may help one another see and embrace all that is going to mean in our lives.

And we need not be afraid or hesitant because we have done this before. We have found our way past the hucksterism that is always part of what the world tries to foist on us, and we have discerned together God’s path into the future, and into God’s mission for us.

So, today as we gather for our Annual Meeting, let us turn toward the light this season of Epiphany is bringing us, let us turn toward Christ who is revealed to us, and let us step bravely forward toward him as he leads us into the new and really improved future. Let this be so. Amen.