FOURTH SUNDAY OF EPIPANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

January 31, 2021

*“Brief, Pithy, But Powerful”*

By now, most of us are familiar with the brief, brief, pithy way the Gospel of Mark tells its story. Mark is the one who never uses two words when one will do. This passage from the first chapter is no exception.

For example: Mark does not bother to set the stage and tell us about this place where Jesus has decided to begin his public ministry of teaching and healing. Mark does not tell us that *Capernaum was an important first-century city at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Nor does he mention that it was the center of the Galilean fishing industry and the probable home of several of Jesus’ fisherman disciples. Capernaum was also garrisoned by a detachment of Roman soldiers.*

I suppose many of the people who first heard this gospel already knew all of this. For us, all these many centuries later, it means that Jesus chose a busy and diverse environment to begin his mission. The synagogue would also have served a mixed crowd of people—visitors but also locals, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, the whole mileu of society at that time.

*The worship service of such a community consisted of praising and blessin prayers, the reading of the Law and the Prophets, accompanied by an exposition of the lesson.*

*Since there was no ordained clergy at that time, it was common practice to invite an adult male Israelite to preach. None of the gospels offer any description of Jesus’ formal training or background. However, that Jesus was allowed to speak in the synagogue indicates that he probably was invited to present a homily on the text, which in turn suggests that he was already known in the area as a man skilled in Torah interpretation.*

None of this is explicit in the text, not for most of us. We are also never told which text Jesus was preaching on.

So, in this gospel, this is Jesus’ first act of public ministry—the first time we see him putting himself forward as a teacher—a voice to be listened to; an authoritative voice. A voice that was going to make things happen.

And whatever he said *did* indeed stir-up his listeners—in a good way.

They were impressed. Indeed, they were like people who had come to church not expecting anything much—that is, nothing different, nothing special. I imagine it was a Sabbath like any other.

I imagine some of the people who had gathered were just biding their time waiting for the end of the service so they could visit with some of their friends and have a good, hearty gossip—that is, catch-up session. Perhaps they were like the way *we* used to be: people who also looked forward to the aloha hour *after* worship when we could munch on homemade refreshments and spend time chatting with good friends.

That is the way it is with church so much of the time. So much of the time we do not come with very much in the way of expectations. We come to hear the stories of the Bible of course—stories we have known all, or most, of our lives—this is a good thing. It is through the stories of the Bible, and the stories of Christ, that we are reminded of who we are, and to whom we belong. So, we come to reaffirm our relationship with God, and our love for each other. The familiarity is comforting and pleasant.

However, truth be told, most of us do not come to church to be surprised. Some of us may even dislike the idea of being surprised at church.

Maybe, *just maybe,* the preacher will have a new interpretation of one of the well-known and beloved stories. However, even this is not supposed to be so new that we are taken aback or flummoxed. Instead, we listen to hear our values reaffirmed in Scripture, and our faith and continuance in them acknowledged, congratulated, and encouraged.

This is not what happened on that particular Sabbath.

On that Sabbath, Jesus stirred-up something deep within the hearts, minds, and spirits of all who were gathered there. Something touched them. It was like a light had been lit in a dark room. Suddenly, the people were sitting up a little taller, leaning in a little further, *really* listening because this new Rabbi’s manner and spirit was doing something new.

Jesus was calling to each of them individually, and all of them together. He was calling *them* to join God’s mission in the world—and their first call of duty was to hear the love, hope, and freedom of God proclaimed in terms that included them, that drew them close and securely bound them to God and to each other.

Jesus’ message of God’s powerful invitation and hold was so stirring that it caused an even frightened, an “unclean spirit” hear it and be rebuked. As one commentator has written:

*“Terrified of a new word from God, this demonic being had thus far been able to live nicely in the comfortable status quo of the synagogue. Fear of this new authoritative voice calling for a fresh interpretation of a faithful life stirred the spirit into speaking, thus betraying its presence to Jesus.*

*“Mark makes sure we understand the cause for the intensity of the demonic spirit’s fear by quoting its wheezed outcry directed at Jesus, saying "the Holy One of God."*

So, with this outburst the unclean spirit seals its own fate. Invoking the very authority the spirit feared, Jesus orders the demonic spirit out of the man, re-ordering that man’s very being with his words.

What I find striking about this scene of release and freedom is that the possessed man’s change is dramatic, even violent. Mark tells us that there was great “convulsing” and “crying out” as the demon leaves its victim.

What this means is that change most often comes only by wrenching free of what holds us. And so, Mark tell us that witnesses present were “amazed” and whispered uneasily about the implications of Jesus’ power and authority for their own lives. One gets the feeling they were both impressed and frightened.

And that is the heart of it all: although we speak of grace, mercy, and love when we speak of Jesus, we should not allow ourselves to equate these gentle, nurturing qualities with a lack of power. What Jesus came to teach us, what he demonstrated with his own life is that love is the most powerful entity in the universe.

What I hope we hear is that the older ways of those things that hold people down, hold us captive, unfairly shame us, and work their best to demean and destroy, to lie and to cheat—these, too, are powerful entities that will not give-up without a fight.

That is why the story Mark wants us to hear is a story of love’s power.

At the very beginning, and throughout the whole of Jesus’ mission and ministry, the love of God is going to power its way through the world. Through all of the trials and suffering where human endeavor will falter and fail, God’s love will endure and will accomplish powerful things—it will call us together in bonds of friendship and caring, it will free us from all that holds us and makes us fearful. God’s love can and will do all of this, even as it accompanies us through dark days, leading us back into peace and fellowship with one another.

Bringing this power into our lives may not be easy or comfortable. However, the power of God’s love can set us free because love makes us courageous and strong—stronger than we ever could even be on our own.

Friends, I know it has been a very challenging time for all of us in so many ways, but I hope you will allow yourself to hear this story of Jesus with new ears. I hope you will allow him to bring you new hope. I hope you will remember the people who were in that synagogue that first morning of Jesus’ ministry. They were not expecting much because they did not yet know him.

We do.

Therefore, my prayer for us is that we will take the stories of Jesus into our hearts. I pray that rather than remembering them only as stories, we remember them as *promises,* promises of the power of God’s love working in *your* life and mine, transforming us, building our faith, and gathering us as beloved brothers and sisters—the body of Christ.

Amen.