

A New Thing
Mark 1:21-28
January 28, 2018 – Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

This church year, starting with the first Sunday of Advent, we're taking a new look at the life and teachings of Jesus and their application to our lives and the life of our church. And so, through Advent, we took a new look at the call of Mary and Joseph, and the birth of Jesus as seen through the eyes of Joseph. Two weeks ago, we considered Jesus baptism, his call, and his temptation to return to the carpenter's shop and continue "business as usual." Last week we heard of Jesus' pronouncement that the Kingdom of God has come near and Jesus' call of the first disciples. This week we read of Jesus teaching in the synagogue – a new teaching with authority.

Friends, I'll tell you right up front. . . with the birth, the baptism, and the ministry of Jesus a new thing has happened. I return to my sermon entitled "The Story of the Bible." It's the first sermon I ever preached in this church, and that was almost seven years ago. I may repeat that sometime; but today, I'll give you the two sentence "Cliff Notes" overview: The entire Old Testament is about God repeatedly calling God's people into relationship. Then, with the birth of Jesus, God said, "Okay, if you won't come to me, I'll come to you"; and the word became flesh and blood, to live our life, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us, and ultimately to die for us, only to rise again to a newness of life with a promise to be with us always. That's the story of the Bible. That's the Good News.

Some of you may have noticed that I generally refer to the first part of the book as the Hebrew Bible as opposed to the Old Testament. I do that because it's academically proper, and I do it out of respect for our Jewish friends. You see, my Jewish friends tell me, "There is nothing 'old' about the Hebrew Scriptures. It is our Bible"; and I agree. There is nothing "old" about the Old Testament. Those first thirty-nine books of the Bible are as valid today as they were when they were written and they are as valid for Christians as they are for Jews. I remind those who discount the value of the Old Testament that this was the Bible of Jesus, the Bible of Paul, and the Bible of the Evangelists. Indeed we cannot fully understand the New Testament without understanding the Hebrew Bible.

Now comes the "gotta." There are those who suggest – "Well if you don't call it the Old Testament, maybe we shouldn't call it the New Testament; and so some have started to refer to the later writings as "the Christian Scriptures"; and I categorically reject that for two reasons. First, I just told you the entire Bible, all sixty-six books are Christian Scriptures. Yes, we share the earlier books with our Jewish brothers and sisters; but they are still sacred scripture to the Christian church. But more importantly, there *is* something "new" about the New Testament. With the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, God did a whole new thing; and the world will never again be the same. More importantly, with the coming of Jesus into our lives, you and I will never be the same. A new thing has

happened. God took on human form to walk with us, with you and with me, to teach us, you and me, to heal us, you and me, and to save us, you and me, to save us from the sins of the world.

So back to today's Gospel lesson. Jesus has been baptized. Jesus has called his disciples. And now, today, we have the story of Jesus' first public act, an exorcism. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, the meeting place, when a man shows up possessed by an evil spirit. The man cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know you are the Holy One of God." And Jesus silences the spirit and it comes out of the man. Yes, Jesus first public act, some would say his first miracle, is an exorcism; but note: this lesson is primarily about teaching, not exorcism.

Oh, by the way, our NRSV translation cheated us. Remember, I've told you that one of Mark's favorite words is *immediately*. *Immediately* – it gives a sense of urgency to the entire Gospel. So a better translation: "And they went to Capernaum; and *immediately* on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught." (RSV; *Emphasis Mine*)

The Gospel does not tell us exactly what he was teaching, but apparently the unclean spirit had a problem with it. The spirit reacted, and Jesus took action to conquer the spirit. And it is in the conquering of the spirit, that the people took note. But what do they say? "A new teaching – with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!" Yes, it's a whole new thing, a whole new teaching!!!

So what is Jesus teaching? We don't know exactly what Jesus was saying on that Sabbath in the synagogue in Capernaum. But we do know that all of Jesus' teaching boils down to those two great commandments: Love God and Love your Neighbor; and, yes I always include a third commandment: Love Yourself, for Jesus did say, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

We've heard these commandments, these instructions, these guides for life repeated; and you will continue to hear them as we journey through the Gospel of Mark. But what about the man possessed by an evil spirit? Many people explain that, in past times, people would equate psychological or emotional problems with demonic possession; and that is certainly true. But, as I've stated before, I really believe that the Gospel was written not only for the first century audience, but also for the twenty-first century audience; and I tell you, we all have our evil spirits.

We all have those "little voices" in the backs of our heads telling us we're not good enough, or we're not smart enough, or we're not talented enough, or we're not strong enough, or we're not good-looking enough. That's one set of evil spirits; I call them the "You're not... enough" spirits.

Then there are the "should have" evil spirits. They're the voices saying, "You should have done this," or "You should have done that." What's that about? Let it go. You made the best decisions you could at the time. Now it's in the past.

Then there is another set of evil spirits; I call them the, "You can get away with it" spirits. Those little voices tell us, "You can cheat on whatever it is;

everybody does it,” or “You can eat that junk food; you can straighten out your diet tomorrow,” or “You don’t need to exercise today; it won’t hurt to skip a day or two or three.” These are also the spirits that can eventually lead to crime and/or addiction. True-to-life, twenty-first century evil spirits.

Indeed, Jesus teaches us to love ourselves; and Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors. Friends, I am continually distressed by certain decisions by our government officials on the local, state, and national level. These are people who claim to be “good Christians”; but it seems that they are not guided by the great commandment to love your neighbor. In some cases, we only love our neighbors when they look like us or act like us or worship like us. In other cases, we have taken the love of self to such an extreme that it has obscured the love of neighbor. Jesus said, love your neighbor as yourself; not love yourself, and then, if it will work, love your neighbor also. Furthermore, when Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor,” he said, “The person that doesn’t look like you, the person that doesn’t worship like you, the person whom your fellow citizen’s hate – that’s your neighbor.” Evil spirits - voices hiding in the back of our heads filling us with contempt, hateful, unloving thoughts about our neighbors.

But Jesus taught, “Love God; love your neighbor; and, love yourself.” You see, in that regard, the teachings and the evil spirits are inextricably linked. Jesus taught as one with authority. Jesus taught as one who would show us the way, who would lead us in the path of righteousness.

The coming of Jesus is a whole new thing, because God is with us first-hand, up close and personal, in a way that the world has never known before, and in a way that our non-Christian friends really don’t understand. (And, when I use the word “Christian,” I’m not speaking about church membership, I’m talking about the conscious decision to follow the teachings of Jesus.)

I have a favorite benediction. Some of you have commented about it. You’ll hear it again to close our service today. But let’s consider it now – in the light of this “new thing,” these new teachings.

May the living Christ go with you.
May he go behind you to encourage you;
beside you to befriend you;
above you to watch over you;
within you to give you strength;
and before you to show you the way.

That’s a new thing. That’s a new teaching. God, in Christ, is with us. God, in Christ, will be with us always; and that knowledge, that teaching, and that love can cast out all the evil spirits. The knowledge of God’s love for us, and our commitment to love God, love others, and love ourselves can defeat those voices that say “We’re not enough” or “we should have” or “we can get away with” or

“other people are bad people” or whatever other evil thoughts, angry feelings, or hurts might enter our minds.

Thanks be to God for word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for the new teachings of love and peace. Thanks be to God for a love that will never die.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Cast the evil spirits out of our lives,
that we might hear the new teaching
and live the new teaching.

Help us to live those commandments to
love God
love our neighbors,
and love ourselves.

Help us to follow wherever you lead.

Amen.

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