

Today we continue reading from the first chapter in the gospel of Mark. Last week we read from the first chapter about Jesus encountering four men and inviting them to follow him. To change the direction of their lives and come and follow him. These four fishermen chose to make this change and follow Jesus.

The story continues in Mark by the writer recording that Jesus travels with this small group of followers as they enter Capernaum, a small community on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is the sabbath, so they seek out a local synagogue and enter it.

It was not unusual for a person with some knowledge of the Jewish faith traditions to enter a new synagogue and to begin teaching. Jesus enters this synagogue in Capernaum and begins to teach. But we will read that the people are surprised by these teachings from this man named Jesus whom they had never met before. Let's read about how they respond to what he has to say.

Read Mark 1:21-28

The people are astounded by his authority. Another interpretation of the word "authority" is "power." The people are astounded by his power.

This has been another week when we have been saddened by events in our area and around the country and world. In our area, we are saddened by the burial of Detective Michael Doty who was killed just 2 miles from here. He died after being shot by a local resident who was accused of beating his wife and Detective Doty responded to the call.

We are also saddened by the death of Karson Whitesell, the teenager who was randomly shot and senselessly killed at the Peach Stand in Fort Mill. Ms. Whitesell graduated high school with my daughter Mary Kathryn from South Pointe.

Yesterday we heard of a group in Afghanistan loading up an ambulance with explosives and killing innocent victims. This week we felt the pain and anguish of another school shooting, this time in Kentucky.

It's easy to see these random and senseless acts of violence and conclude that evil is stronger than good in this world. When we begin to spiral into those places of despair it is important to turn to scriptures like we read today.

In the Scripture that we read from Mark, Jesus is recorded as beginning his ministry and the first response to his ministry is for someone to try to pick a fight. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue and immediately a man confronts him.

This man screams out toward Jesus, "why are you here? Have you come to destroy us?" Not exactly affirmation of the ministry of Jesus and the message which he was trying to share.

This story becomes even more interesting because this man with the unclean spirit immediately knows who Jesus is. That is not uncommon in the scriptures. There are other examples where it is the ones driven by evil intent that recognize who Jesus is.

Jesus responds quickly to this evil in his midst. Jesus notes that it is not the man who is evil. The evil is the spirit that rests inside of him. Faced with this confrontation, Jesus cries out to the spirit in this man to "Be silent." To be silent and to come out of him.

Mark then records that the unclean spirit is released from this man. It does not happen easily or cleanly. The evil spirit causes the man to convulse and to scream loudly. But eventually the evil spirit is released, and the man is freed.

Unlike in other places in the scriptures, the crowd here seems to get it. The crowd is amazed, and they comment to one another: "What is this? This man teaches something new. This man teaches with authority and power."

I sometimes hear people lament the evil in the world. The evil associated with another senseless gun death in our community. The evil associated with the mistreatment of innocent animals. The evil associated with harsh words said to the most vulnerable and innocent in our society. The evil associated with random acts of destruction toward people trying to do good in our world.

It is easy to look to these acts and conclude that evil is all powerful and overwhelming. But when we feel overwhelmed by these random and evil acts, it is important to read once again a story like we read this morning.

When faced with pure evil, Jesus calls out to the face of evil and says, "Be silent." And the evil force goes silent and is removed from the man tormented. Once again, God in Jesus shows greater power than any evil in this world.

But wait a second, you may respond. In this biblical story, evil is defeated, and the evil force is removed. In our world we do not see that. We will hear soon of another innocent life taken by someone shooting a gun at them. We will hear of another act of cruelty done against someone who is innocent and vulnerable.

We will hear of another act of cruelty done against an animal. We will hear of these acts and conclude that Jesus doesn't really seem to care about these evil spirits in our world.

And maybe that is a fair conclusion based on the evidence that we see. But we are invited to look at these events from a different perspective. We are invited to be a part of the crowd that is open to the power and authority of Jesus. We are invited to be a part of the crowd that is transformed by Jesus.

It is easy to be the one who sees Jesus as Amazing Jesus who performs miracles. Wow. Come and let me share with you a story about what Amazing Jesus who can do amazing things like turn water in wine. But if we only focus on Amazing Jesus then we will remain shallow in our faith.

It's easy to be the one who sees Jesus as a great moral teacher. Come and let me share with you about Jesus who shows us right from wrong. But if we only focus on Morality Jesus then we will remain shallow in our faith.

It's easy to be the one who sees Jesus as Charming Jesus. Come and let me share with you about Jesus who had a big following. But if we only focus on Charming Jesus then we will remain shallow in our faith as well.

Instead we are invited to follow Jesus who invites us to trust and to follow and who is able to silence the most demonic of forces. We do not have to allow acts of evil to overwhelm us. We do not have to allow acts of evil to define who we are as a people and as a culture.

Instead, we can trust and follow Jesus and believe that his power and authority is greater than any evil in this world. We can trust and follow Jesus and believe that evil in this world will always be overcome somehow and some day by God in Jesus.

Some of us may be facing some pretty evil acts in our lives right now. Maybe the stories of violence or abuse or addiction or illness or evil spirits are not something out there but very much close into your life and family right now.

And maybe you are worried that whatever evil is near you is stronger than you. Maybe you are worried that there is no victory to be had over evil.

None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. But we are invited by Jesus to be ones who in the face of evil trust him to be stronger. We are invited to hear him as he faces the evil in our lives and hear him as he says to this evil, "Be silent."

We are invited to hear evil do just that. To hear the evil become silent. AMEN.

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-Given: January 28, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)