

“What Have You to Do with Us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Mark 1:21-28

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
January 28th, 2024
Matt Matthews

When Jesus preached, he preached as one who had authority. What he is preaching in this instance is not discussed in this passage. Mark reports only that his preaching had an effect. *People were astounded.*

In other places in the gospels, the religious leaders of the day are often turned off by what Jesus preaches and what Jesus does. He heals on the sabbath. He welcomes women and eats with outcasts. His interpretation of Moses's law is often not shared by the Scribes or Pharisees. His idea of “neighbor” includes everyone; yes, Jews, but also Gentiles, Samaritans, women and children and the mentally ill (like, maybe, the man we are meeting in this passage today?). Jesus got the religious leaders of his day so upset once, they ran him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

In just the first 400-words of Mark's Gospel we are given reason to believe that a friendship with Jesus might be dangerous. Mark paints a picture in which baptism reminds us of human sin. When Jesus is baptized, God rips open the heavens and God pronounces his favor on Jesus and then drives Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of spiritual testing by none other than Satan. (By now, we might wonder, who on earth wants to associate with Jesus?) After John is arrested, Jesus begins his ministry by inviting people to repent and believe.

In just these few opening paragraphs, this is a lot to take in.

The reason life with Jesus seems dangerous is, clearly, because it is dangerous.

So, yes, God will certainly forgive us for being a little wary about this Jesus. Jesus comes to love us, and we are eager to welcome him into our hearts. But he comes, also, to judge us, and before we welcome him into the cockles of our hearts, we are right to wonder if we ought to clean ourselves up a little bit before answering the door at which he knocks.

If Jesus were to show up in the middle of our lives, he might do the same thing to us as he did to that troubled man in our text today. He might take our worlds (the crooked things we value, the mean-spirited politics we allow and espouse, our greed, our love of war, our sloth, our lukewarm practice of a sometimes brainless religion) and shake us upside down to get it out of us. *Come out, come out*, he might say, holding us up by our thin heels.

If he burns the impurities of my life away, I wonder, will there be anything left of me?

Am I ready for my life to undergo that kind of exorcism?

When he invites me to follow, am I willing to go where he actually leads?^[1]

Jesus consistently calls people to repent. To change. To turn from their selfish way. *Turn from sin*, Jesus says. *Turn toward me. And, come on: follow.*

If you know anything about Jesus' track record (heavens being ripped open, relatives getting arrested, forty days of testing by the Devil, etc), you might think twice before calling on him. Who'd want to follow him even if he came?

And he does come.

When he comes and asks Simon-Peter and his brother Andrew to follow him and he will make them fishers of people (huh?), they drop everything, and they follow. When he invites James and John to follow him, they do the same. They drop their nets and follow.

Why?

Maybe they saw in Jesus the face of God. And maybe it didn't matter if their lives got turned upside down. Maybe they knew if they followed Jesus they'd never be led astray. Sure, it might be hard (little could they know), but at least they'd be alive. And for once, maybe, they'd be whole and their lives would, really, matter. And, maybe, they figured Jesus needed some help and they were happy, happy to lend a hand in what they perceived would be, could be, transformative, meaningful, interesting, holy work.

So, by God, they followed.

I can't tell you for sure why they followed, only that they, and billions of other since, have, too. They have followed. We have followed.

And what about the troubled man in our text this morning? We might say in today's lingo that he was having a mental health crisis. In Mark's day, Mark reports he was filled with unclean spirits. What about him?

That man is healed, that's what. That man so long burdened is set free.

Jesus—who loves the whole wide world, whose got the whole world in his hands, who can calm the storms with a word and can feed five-thousand on a few fish and loaves of bread, who can mourn the broken and raise the dead, this Jesus, with the Spirit's power and with God's love, healed this broken man.

That's what happened to him. Jesus healed that man who was so heavily burdened and so, so deeply afraid.

I suspect on that day in Capernaum, at least one more person dropped what he was doing, got up, and followed Jesus.

* * *

When Jesus preached, he preached as one who had authority. Mark reports that his preaching had an effect. *People were astounded.* And to this day, we still are.

And we still follow.

To God be the glory, AMEN.

Mark 1:21-28 ²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

