

Sermon 2-1-2015 Mark 1:21-28 "Power, Deliverance and Praise"
with Psalm 150 and the song, "Shine, Jesus, Shine!" Call to Worship - Romans 8:31-39

Power. Everybody seems to want it. This morning on the drive over I heard more about ISIS trying to gain power through the kidnappings and beheadings. We know a lot about power struggles. We see them every time our Congress meets. We watch them in courtrooms. Management struggles with labor. There are struggles in our local governments, sometimes in our church family, and quite often within our biological families. I even watched power struggles at my bird feeder this week, as certain birds exerted dominance over others.

The people of Jesus' day were well-acquainted with struggles over power. Roman armies occupied their country and enforced the Emperor's taxes. Jewish tax collectors pressured their compatriots as they sought to collect extra monies for their own treasuries. Even the Temple priests overpowered the people by being extremely finicky as to allowable sacrifices, and by selling "acceptable" animals for sacrifice at highly inflated prices... The common people were pushed down, depleted of the richness of life... And out of this milieu there came forth many who claimed to be God's prophets, who claimed even to be God's Messiahs... Miracle workers, teachers... vying for credibility. In the midst of this same confusion was born Jesus of Nazareth.

The opening verses of the Gospel of Mark serve as a kind of prelude to the ministry of Jesus. First he was baptized by his cousin John, then he was led into the wilderness where he was tested by Satan. Finally he returned and chose the first of his disciples. The preparatory phase ended.

Today we heard about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. According to Mark, it began in the synagogue of Capernaum. The frame of today's story is the astonishment of Jesus' hearers, for he spoke, not simply as a teacher citing chapter and verse and opinion, but as one who had authority. The reaction of those who heard Jesus was amazement: "What is this? A new teaching?" The picture within the frame is significant, for it turns out that one of the worshippers in the temple had an unclean spirit, a demon, and the demon could not stand the power of Jesus' words. Immediately the demon challenged Jesus, demanding, "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."

The demon's words are perhaps better understood if we keep in mind the fact that back then, it was believed that if one knew a demon's name, then one had a better chance of casting it out or at least managing it. In the same way, to know a person's name was to have some measure of control over the person, the ancient people believed. So the demon tried to take the initiative with Jesus, to gain power over Jesus by identifying him and calling out his name.

It didn't work, because Jesus' words had all the authority and power of God. Jesus commanded the demon, "Be silent!" or more literally, "Be muzzled!" as if the demon were nothing more than an annoying dog. When Jesus told him to get out of the man, there was no question but that the

demon would do so. The evil spirit departed, defeated. The power of Jesus' word overwhelmed the demon and the worshiper was healed even as he writhed in agony during the process.

We may feel like saying, "What in the world does this have to do with us today?" Today we may not call our afflictions demons, but we certainly know the power of them. Greed, alcoholism, depression, cancer, arthritis, COPD, heart problems, drug addition, the inability to stop gambling... Prejudice, sexism and racism, child abuse... Broken families, corporate irresponsibility, persistent abuse of the world's resources.... In spite of our satellites and surgical lasers and digital communication, we have not progressed as far as we might have hoped since the first century after Jesus' birth. In spite of all our medical advances, many of us still find ourselves as haunted and driven and crippled by forces beyond our control as were the people in Jesus' day. Whether we talk about pitchforks and pointed tails or not doesn't matter. If a demon is something within us that steals away our joy and hope and strength, some inner failing that turns our lives into burdens and trials, a hardness which keeps us from turning either to our neighbors or to God, then our world is literally smothered in demons.

So we turn to the Gospel and the power of its message: Jesus Christ has power over whatever demons are in our lives or in this life! There is power in his word! And we who dare to try to hear it and let it touch our lives can be astonished by it, even to this day. Not a bad message to hear as terrorists threaten and our prayer list grows longer and we find ourselves more and more tense over life.

Jesus has the power to set you free from whatever keeps you from living, whether it is fear of the global situation or a twenty-year old resentment festering deep within your heart. Cancer or deception, pain or terrible failure, there is nothing strong enough to keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus if we will just let Jesus have power in our lives. That's the catch.

There was a cartoon years ago in some magazine that had a woman sitting on the examining table in a doctor's office. She was pale, drawn, and sickly. She said to the doctor: "What can I do to feel better without giving up the things that are making me feel bad?" There is no point in asking God to cast out demons we intend to hang on to. I want to lose weight, but I don't want to give up chocolate, or most of the rest of the stuff I eat. When I look in a mirror, my resolve is strong, but as soon as I look somewhere else, I am hungry!

Remember when the rich ruler came up to Jesus and said, "I've kept the laws, I go to worship, I pray and read the Bible. What else must I do to find real life?" Jesus encouraged him, in essence, "You're on the right track. There's just one more demon you need to cast out. You love your money too much. Give away everything you have and follow me." The man went away sad, for he could not let go his grasp on that security. (See Luke 18:18-30)

Life can shake us up and make us feel powerless. But in the midst of the shaking, we are offered One who has himself experienced every side of the human struggle, One who has risked

giving up his hold even on life so as to gain power and authority over every demon in life and death. This One is Jesus, this One offers us life.

Jesus has the power to give us LIFE, but it may not be the life that we are praying for. I want to tell you about Marge, a friend of mine who was a member of one of my other churches. When I first met her, she put me off a bit, for she was full of advice, but it seemed to have an agenda behind it that I found somewhat disconcerting. It turned out that this woman had a debilitating disease, an autoimmune disease, that ended up causing her to undergo a number of surgeries that were actually unnecessary. Once she was finally accurately diagnosed with the very painful and challenging (sometimes life-threatening as her own body attacked its own heart muscle or lungs, etc), there was some relief that at least she had name for this condition, but she still struggled, sometimes with breathing, sometimes with walking, always with pain.

One night we were holding a Lenten prayer service for healing, and during it this woman came forward and everybody came around her and laid hands on her and prayed for her. The next day, she came to me to report that something had happened to her, something good. Though she was not healed of the disease, her spirit *was* healed, and this woman began a new life. Over the next several years, she poured her life out for others, inspiring such things as the prayer brochure we have for our church today, the prayer-grams, and all sorts of ministries that reached out with deep compassion to help others. She was healed, even though to this day she struggles physically. Her life became an instrument that God has used powerfully! There is undeniable power and praise in this woman's life!

Soon we will share the communion meal, the food of healing and wholeness given by Jesus just before he gave up his own life in the face of cruel power and death. This communion meal proclaims that Jesus was able to offer love and forgiveness in the face of hatred, and that he had power even over death. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God as given to us in Christ Jesus! May our lives be filled with Christ's life as we partake of these elements, and may we be astonished by the power of God who is working in our very midst, even today! May we see it, may we claim it, and may we always know that we belong to God. Amen.

Benediction

Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond what we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory, now and forever!!! May we praise God with everything that we are! Amen. (From Ephesians 3:20)