

"Pay attention!"

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Ps. 111; Mark 1: 21-28

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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How do people get our attention? Do they call our name? Do they yell? Do they talk about hundreds of billions of dollars? Do they do something that is unexpected or out of the ordinary?

Today's Gospel text is about a time when Jesus got everyone's attention, including the attention of a person who was demon-possessed.

The setting for this story from Mark's Gospel is very important. Jesus isn't just at any place in town on any day of the week. He is in the synagogue and it is the Sabbath - - he is in sacred space at a sacred time. He is in the arena of the Scribes, the sacred authorities of the day.

Jesus steps onto the turf of the Scribes and the religious leaders and announces the in-breaking power of the kingdom of God. Mark doesn't tell us the content of his sermon that day, only the reaction of the crowd. He got their attention. All acknowledged his authority and contrasted it with the authority of the scribes.

The Scribal authority came from years of study of Scripture and their ability to quote the Rabbis and other sources. Jesus' authority came from the fact that when he spoke, it happened.

In this regard we hear echoes of the text from Deuteronomy. God spoke of the authentic voice of the prophet, one who would come after

Moses. The authenticity and authority of the prophet will be in whether what he says comes to pass or not.

The Scribes may have been devoted students of the holy word of God, but Jesus IS the Word of God. In comparison to them, Jesus didn't need to footnote the text: he was (and is) the Text. He is the Word made flesh. His word has authority because he is Authority Incarnate.

But the people didn't know that, at least not yet. They knew he was special, but just how special? Well, low and behold, the sermon is interrupted with the outburst of an unclean, demon-possessed person.

What was he doing in church? In this holy place, at this holy hour, in the presence of the Holy One of God? I guess it just goes to show that anyone can come to church in any state of mind or health.

This demon-possessed soul cries out to Jesus. The people didn't know who Jesus was, but the demon did! It knew exactly who Jesus was. It even called out to Jesus with words of challenge and words of fear: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (Mk 1:24)

He already knows the answer and so do we. The arrival of Jesus on the scene signals the end of the reigning power of evil and its hold on humanity. Jesus, the redeemer, has come to rescue and to release his people from hands too strong for us.

This outburst marks a direct confrontation between the ministry of Jesus and the powers and possessions that run counter to the things of God. The demon knew that when Jesus is around it isn't just business as usual. It knew that if Jesus is in town demands will be made and living a double life will become increasingly difficult.

The demon knew that Jesus doesn't share authority with anyone. Jesus will be who he is as Lord and Savior and the Holy One of Israel. He will be the Master, but he will not push his way into our lives. He is the one who stands at the door and knocks. It is up to us to decide whether we will allow the things that possess us to fall by the wayside so that our hands are free to receive what Jesus has to offer.

Yes, we are here along with our various demons, those things that compete with God for our attention and our time. We want to draw close, but not too close. We want to let God in, but not too far. We are afraid of how our lives might have to change if we really surrendered more fully to God.

But, what is our fear? Are we afraid Jesus will destroy us or give us life? Is his message one of bondage or freedom? Things will have to change, to be sure. Repentance is a key ingredient in the new life that Jesus offers.

Like people everywhere we cry out: "Jesus, what do you have to do with us?" This is the cry of all those who bring their lives into the light of God's presence. When we drag before God our half-hearted promises, our guilty self-condemnation, our loneliness and hopelessness in the face of age or illness or death, our confusion, or anger or our intolerance, in short, when we bring our selves into church, is it any wonder that we cry out and want to know: "What have you to do with us?? Jesus, the Holy One of God?"

The answer is that Jesus wants to have everything to do with us - - With our lives, our loves, our families, our jobs, our life together in community, yes, even our checkbooks. His call is urgent. His voice has authority. He has come to put us in our right minds, to restore us and

set us free from the weights that hold us down, to help us make sense out of the disorder and the disasters that assault us day by day.

God's intentions are to intervene and to make it clear that there is only one authority for our lives and our life together, and that is the Word of God made flesh in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are those people who stand in need of the healing and the wholeness that Jesus provides. We are the ones who need not be afraid of what God offers to us. We are the ones who stand to receive the grace, mercy, hope and love of God in a more and more complete and powerful way.

The only question is whether we are willing to believe that God knows us through and through and loves us in spite of every unlovable part of our personality and our character, our history and our habits. Do we believe that God is able to meet us in our need and is willing to pour out his grace even on people like us?

To say "Yes, Lord, I believe you are able", means that our lives are on a path toward blessing. It means our life together as a congregation will be enriched and we will be better able to support and to serve those whom God places in our path and calls us to pay attention to.

But, make no mistake, it also means that we have to confront the things in us that run counter to God's purpose and plan for our lives. It means we need to take inventory of our thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, words and actions which may run counter to Christ's command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is demanding work. It is soul-searching work. But it is joyful work when we keep in mind the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we pay attention to the presence of God in our midst, things happen.

When we, in our brokenness and sin, come in contact with the healing ministry of Jesus, there is a potential for change and for healing and for wholeness.

This is the message of the *Gospel*, God's word of hope for you and for me. This is the message of the meal spread before us: that God gives us what we need, nourishing our spirits with his very presence among us today and everyday. So let's pay attention to the message and the meal and the Master who has come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.