Sermon, January 28, 2018

Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Vikki Clayton

Annual Meeting Sunday

As a young child, if your parents told you the core of the earth was filled with jellybeans and that if you sliced a mountain in half marshmallow fluff would flow out there was a pretty good chance you’d believe them. I know I did.

After all, they’re our parents. They knew how the world worked.

They spoke with authority and that meant we believed they knew what they were talking about.

In the synagogue the authority figures were the leaders of the synagogue, the scribes, rabbis, etc. They would debate minute passages of scripture to make a point and cite the Torah as their source of authority.

So when Jesus enters the synagogue in Capernaum, a little town in Galilee, t it was customary for a visitor to the synagogue to be invited to speak, it was considered an honor. The congregation expected him to open discussions about scripture.

Yet Jesus passes right over this custom and stands up to speak. And he begins teaching, “as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

He proclaims the good news of God: “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the good news.”

This was a new teaching and the people were amazed. He might just as well have said the moon was made of Swiss cheese, they were that stunned.

Now I want to fill you in on something - the author of Mark’s gospel uses a literary technique, which we’ll encounter many times this year. In this technique Mark takes two stories and interweaves them in order to shine light on a particular aspect of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Today that topic is authority, specifically, Jesus claiming authority at the beginning of his ministry.

And the two stories Mark weaves together are of Jesus boldly teaching in the synagogue and the exorcism of an unclean spirit from one of the men listening to Jesus.

In the exorcism portion, the unclean spirit already knows who Jesus is. Actually all the demons know because he uses the word “us”, as when he says, “What have you to do with us? ... I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

By combining these two stories: Jesus teaching that the reign of God has already begun, and the unclean spirits’ knowing who Jesus is, the author of Mark is telling us readers something very important:

Healing and teaching are integral to Jesus’ ministry and the reign of God has already begun – the unclean spirits’ day has already come to an end.

Now we know this. Jesus’ healing and teaching worked hand in hand and his authority to act with such confidence came from the Father.

But this was news to those people in the synagogue. God was bringing about a new day, one where His proclamations through Jesus would change the world.

What I find interesting in this passage is that it follows directly after Mark describes Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him.

And a major responsibility of following him is that they too are given authority to teach and heal others.

We’re talking about a different type of authority than what we often see in our day-to-day lives. This new day, this new reign of God, is a collaborative mission.

This is the authority we are given in our baptism when we are filled with the Holy Spirit. With God’s help we learn to love others in the power of the Spirit and we are given a mission to go out into the world in witness to God’s love,

This is the authority given to young, old alike.

So speak with authority, you know how the world works, and you also know how the Spirit works within you. So be generous with your teaching, share what you know of God’s love.

And remember – be gentle and lighthearted too. It’s ok sometimes to say chocolate milk comes from brown cows. That kind of levity can be just the type of healing we need to hear to keep us grounded.