

Sermon – Mark 1:21-28
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
4 Epiphany – Year B
31 January 2021

“The Word Speaks Silence”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I'm not often at a lost for words. Of course, you don't need me to tell you that, but I'll tell you anyway. I like to talk. It's an occupational hazard, I suppose. Preachers gonna preach. That's not to say I've never found myself silenced. Music often does the trick, whether it's the joy of hearing a band play the opening riff of a favorite song, or the awe that comes over me as the last notes of a Bach aria hang in the air. A piece of news might do bring me up silent, hearing for the first time of something tragic or triumphant. And as my children will point out with a mix of glee and shame, I'm sometimes reduced to silent tears by a really good commercial for coffee or laundry detergent. Honestly, some of those copywriters really know how to touch my heartstrings! But I'm not usually at a loss of words for long, and never in quite the same way as was experienced in this synagogue on a sabbath long ago.
2. Mark's Gospel keeps moving at a quick pace, from the fishermen's boats up the shore to Capernaum. The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom is near; no time to slow down. While the good news is good for some, it is less so for others. For Simon and Andrew, James and John, the coming of Christ creates an invitation; for others it leads to confrontation. This unfolds on two fronts today. Jesus, without an invitation, takes it upon himself to teach in the synagogue. Those present are astounded by his teaching, not because of the content but because of his authority. His is not the polished preaching of the

scribes (or senior pastors) but the proclamation of One with power. The scribes and their hearers have nothing to say, but there is one who speaks: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” The scribes represent the old ways; they hear in Jesus something new heralding the end of their time. But this spirit, this demon, is not going down without speaking up. While the people wonder who can wield such authority, the unclean spirit knows Jesus right away, sees him for who and what he is: the Holy One of God.

3. One might wonder what the content of Jesus’ teaching was that day, but Mark’s telling makes clear that Jesus’ power *is* the teaching. It is Jesus himself whose presence silences the scribes, Jesus whose power subdues and exorcises the demon. It is Jesus who brings an end to the old ways, which are by no means evil but have served their purpose; it is Jesus who brings an end to the rebellion of evil that seeks to displace God. It is Jesus, the Word of God, who silences our words and replaces them with wonder; Jesus, the Word of God whose creative power destroys the destructive demonic. With Jesus, the power *is* the teaching, revealing a freedom that unbinds us from all that afflicts us – even and especially sin, death, and the devil.
4. We have little trouble with the first two of these. Oh, make no mistake. We have plenty of trouble with sin, and just as much with death. Not a one of us has managed to master them yet. What I mean is that we can understand sin and death, at least at some level. After all, we see them all the time. But the devil? Demons, unclean spirits, legions of evil? Well. That’s all a bit archaic for our taste most of the time. But deep down, underneath our defense mechanisms, I think we know this power is real. The sin and brokenness we see, feel, inflict, and suffer in this world is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. While we dare not let ourselves off the hook or deny our culpability, we cannot pretend that there is not also evil, very real evil, at work in the world. Today, in the power of Jesus, we are invited to name the demons. This week marked the seventy-sixth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a

day that is observed as Holocaust Remembrance Day. I've walked that ground, stood in the Crematorium and stared into the gas chambers and the ovens. Sin was working overtime there, yes, but you cannot tell me that evil is not real, that demons don't prowl. Of course, there are those even today who think it was all a hoax but, then again, conspiracy theories are all the rage. These "theories" take on a life of their own, demonic in motivating people to evil. And of course, there are the ever-present twin demons of racism and white supremacy. Again, we name these as demonic not to minimize the very real ways in which we, in our sin, contribute to and benefit from them. We name them as demonic to recognize that they have a power over us that we cannot shake or shrug off, let alone defeat, on our own. You can't tell me that evil isn't real, and you can't tell me we can defeat it on our own. We'll fare no better in that fight than against sin or death.

5. Still, as it was on that sabbath so on this one: The news this morning is nevertheless good. Time is up. Fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is near, here. Jesus goes toe to toe with this unclean spirit. He silences the demon and sends him packing. Jesus' teaching *is* the power, and it's a power to set us free. I recently finished Ibram X. Kendi's masterful history of racism, *Stamped from the Beginning*. It's long but worth it; there's even a youth edition, which is being read and discussed by our youth group at Grace. Kendi's narrative is gripping, revealing that while we may have made progress, racism continues to keep pace. We, in our sin, contribute willfully, but racism also exerts a power over us. Yet Kendi concludes with hope: "No power lasts forever. There will come a time when Americans realize that the only thing wrong with Black people is that they think something is wrong with Black people. . . . There will come a time when we will love humanity, when we will gain the courage to fight for an equitable society for our beloved humanity, knowing, intelligently, that when we fight for humanity, we are fighting for ourselves." "Maybe," Kendi muses, "just maybe, that time is now."

6. As Christians, we confess that the power to achieve such a goal is forever beyond our reach. But it is not beyond reach of Jesus, whose teaching is power, whose power is freedom. The Word speaks silence, to us and in us. It brings our old lives, bound in sin and beset by evil, to newness of life in the waters of baptism. To set us free, every baptism contains an exorcism. When you were brought to the waters of grace, you (or more likely, those who presented you) were asked: "Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises." In the threefold pouring of water in the name of the Triune God, the trifold forces of evil were put to rout. Jesus' teaching is power, and evil no longer has power over you. You have been set free. You have received a new spirit that drives out the unclean and the evil: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in the Lord's presence. Bound up in the Holy Spirit, we are free to unbind others from the chains and demons that bind them. The demons are real, but they are no match for Jesus, the Holy One of God.
7. As evil is silenced, as we fall silent in awe, we are broken open to hear the Word. And out of that silence flows the only proper response: Praise. Out of our wonder, praise. Out of our grief, praise. Out of our joy, praise. When we are at a loss for words, the Word comes to us in our loss. We are gifted with words from the Word, words which often find their freest and fullest expression in the church's song. A week ago, on the Sabbath, death came for our beloved Carl Schalk. His voice, however, is not silenced, for he sings now in the eternity of Christ, along with Mary and Jim and all the saints in light. And we who live still in this world of sin, death, and evil – we sing the better with the gifts Carl gave us. On my first Easter at Grace, I looked up during the Sending Hymn and, as the words swirled in song around me, I fell silent, overcome and at a loss for words: *Then the holy holy holy celebration jubilee / thine the splendor thine the brightness only thee only thee*. What joy, what grace, what a foretaste of the feast to come! I fell silent as you sang because of

the power of the proclamation. Yes, sin is real, evil is real, death is real. But all are defeated, all have met their match, for the teaching of Jesus is his power, and his power is freedom. Freedom from all that seeks to bind us, in this world and the next. The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom is near, here. The Holy One of God, crucified and alive, has come to silence all that opposes God's reign of grace and mercy. Let us be silent before the Word as Jesus teaches and frees us again; then, with his words, let us sing the song of resurrection victory. Thine the amen! Amen. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.