

“Astounding Teaching!”

Mark 1: 21 – 28

January 28, 2018

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

Let us begin in prayer and how very appropriate are the final words to the anthem just sung:

Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you.

Let your Spirit meet us here to mend the body, mind, and soul,

To disentangle peace from pain and make your broken people who.

I think it's safe to say that those of us who preach don't just sit down one day with scripture and commentaries and pull a sermon together. Talking with colleagues, I've found that my experience is not unique. Most of the time we have the scripture in the back of our minds for a couple of weeks, carrying it with us. Sometimes the scripture is heavy, other times light. Sometimes it's like putting on my glasses in the morning, influencing how I see or interpret things throughout the week. The last couple of weeks I've been seeing demons.

A few weeks ago I was invited to join other clergy for a Bible study meeting for an hour each week for three weeks, focusing on social justice issues in the text. We met at Shiloh Baptist, a small group diverse ecumenically and racially. Our first text was Mark's text for today. And immediately (I have to use that word because the gospel writer Mark uses it all the time!), immediately we began to focus on demons. Pastor Owens of Shiloh told about a man who has often come into worship, who is both homeless and mentally ill, and disrupts worship by standing and either proclaiming his own gospel or questioning the text of the day. Our conversation revolved around the demons of mental illness, of addictions that often grip the homeless. Then the lens widened further to include the demon of poverty that has hold of so many and then those societal demons of racism and all of the 'isms' that keep some of us from living as fully as God desires for us to live. I left seeing demons.

Tuesday is my day off and I begin each Tuesday with a group of Disciple clergy women in another sort of Bible study, more like Bible reflection and meditation, sitting with the text in silence for awhile, allowing a word or phrase to speak to our hearts. This past Tuesday as I walked into the room I was the second to arrive. The facilitator of the group

had gotten there just before me but she when we met, she was walking out of the building. “There’s been a shooting at Marshall County High School. My niece is a student there!” She left, the rest of us gathered together with the text for that day which she had left with us. Today’s text from Mark. What demon took hold of that 15 year old on that day? I left seeing demons.

I’ve been walking around seeing demons, the demon of greed that has such a hold on our government, the demon of cancer that took the life one of our member’s family, I’ve been seeing demon. The usual question that most progressive, middle class, white congregations like ourselves usually ask, the question, “Are there really demons?” is not the question I was carrying around but rather ‘Which demons to focus on?’ because I’ve been seeing demons.

Then one day, by the grace of God plus perhaps a bit more study, I awoke and somehow, somehow, just like there was another pair of glasses waiting for me to put on that morning, I began to see differently. My vision, my focus changed. Perhaps one could say it was an epiphany, ‘ah ha!’ moment, but the focus changed from the demons in the middle of our short reading for today to the words that book end that middle; “What is this? A new teaching! And one with authority, not as the scribes! And they were astounded.”

The question then turned from “What demons are in our midst?” to “What is this new teaching?” This ‘new teaching’ that called Simon and Andrew and James and John? This ‘new teaching’ that had more influence and power than the teaching of the scribes? This ‘new teaching’ that astounded the crowds? This new teaching that even casts out demons?

And we return to the text with pen in hand to write down the words or phrase that explain the ‘new teaching’ and we find.... nothing. What did Jesus say there in the temple? We don’t know. In Matthew’s gospel, we are given the Beatitudes as guidance, teachings. Luke’s gospel is filled with short parables that outline Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of heaven. Mark’s gospel, on the other hand, shows us the results of those new teachings; demons are cast out, people are healed. And often those results are the teaching in themselves.

A ‘new teaching’. Sometimes we Christians are a bit smug to our Jewish brothers and sisters. We get this idea that Jesus came up with a whole new idea, like having invented

a new math equation or discovered a new chemical element for the periodic table. We forget that Jesus was grounded in the teachings of the prophets, those same teachings known by the scribes. When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” he didn’t invent something new but quoted from Torah, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart.” So what was so ‘new’ about these teachings that astounded and healed?

‘New’ can mean something that has not existed before. It can also mean, as probably more fitting in this scripture, something ‘uncommon, unprecedented, fresh’. The people following Jesus had most likely heard his teaching before from the scribes. But the scribes were more concerned with interpreting and following the letter of the law and regulations and traditions became more important than the spirit of the law itself. Somehow, not only in the words of Jesus but in his actions, in his priorities, the law of love that he embodied was seen a ‘new’; he who is the window through which we as Christians most clearly see the heart of God, gain a fresh, not common, unprecedented way of seeing the world as in God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

We don’t have the words but I kind of get the sense that when Jesus arrived at the temple to teach, he does not deliberate or debate but declares, proclaims the good news of God; “folks, gather around! The time is now! The kingdom of God has come near!” And people saw through Jesus the nearness of their God, saw, from the words of author Gary Charles, “from chapter 1 that the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law-transcending son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, p. 313)

Not only heard but saw in his actions, the love that he preached about lived out. They witnessed the characteristics of the reign of God; that place where nothing is broke and everybody belongs, they began to see one who began to mend the broken and reach out to the outcast, drawing the circle of God’s love so very wide that you couldn’t see where the boundary of that love ended. And the people were astounded.

Sometimes we as the church forget that we are the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We act more like scribes; debating, deliberating, more concerned about institution and status quo, even delivering a message in words but then not following through in action. But then there are those moments, those ‘ah ha!’ moments when we claim our identity and astound those around us as we live the kingdom; breaking down boundaries, even casting out demons!

A couple of hundred years ago a man by the name of Alexander Campbell got fed up with the rules of that time of the Presbyterian church – that one had to be given permission by the Elders to take communion, that given a token by the higher up ‘scribes’ allowed one to receive the bread and cup at worship. He had enough, and in one boundary breaking moment he threw the token on the table and walked out, declaring as he went that there was to be no barrier between anyone and God. And people were astounded!

A couple of decades ago as the scribes announced policies and theological statements keeping gay and lesbian people from being a part of church, the spirit of the living Christ announced it’s presence in the form of those who stood and declared that all people are children of God and all means all. And people looking in from the outside of the church walls were astounded.

The way of Jesus, what he proclaimed in word and in action, was astounding teaching then, new teaching that the world needed then and still needs today. Can we as followers be carriers of this new way of being – this uncommon, novel way of being in the world – bringing that message of a loving God that breaks down barriers and casts out demons?

Really? Casts out demons, you say? Some of you may have heard a report this week on NPR about the dis-ease of loneliness? Can have as much harmful effect on a body as smoking 15 cigarettes a day! And that it’s almost an epidemic in our society. Loneliness – not necessarily being alone. One can be fine by oneself and feel alone in a crowd. Loneliness in this study had to do with 3 things; not having meaning in life, not belonging, not having a sense of self worth. The message that we have for the world is astounding, a ‘new teaching’ in this culture of loneliness; meaning in serving and caring for others, a message that we all belong to God and that we are valued because we are children of God.

And those who are tired and weary from the demons of the world will look in and say, “Look, a new teaching! A teaching that has power and influence. A teaching that proclaims there is enough love for you and for me and for all the world!” And they were astounded.

May it be so.