

Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 4B, Sunday, February 1, 2015
Mark 1:21-28 (4:35-41)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Questions... what questions have you come with today? Or if not today in particular, what questions do you live with? Questions about church... questions about God... just... questions... what are your questions? [get responses...]

The kinds of questions we ask, or that we are asked, can tell us a lot. Our questions set the agenda because they determine what it is we're watching for and often, thereby determine the answers we get. Moreover, the spirit behind a question can have great implications for its answer... we can ask questions with openness and curiosity or we can ask questions with judgement and expectation. We can ask questions that open up possibility and we can ask questions that limit the available options. Questions matter... and it is the questions I want us to consider in our gospel today.

We remain in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark and the story has been whirlwind so far! In a mere 20 verses, Mark has introduced "the good news of Jesus Christ," with John the baptizer appearing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. And then in short order, Jesus himself is baptized by John in the river Jordan, he is driven into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation, he travels to Galilee to begin ministry by proclaiming the good news of God and then calls his first disciples, who immediately leave their nets to follow him. After such a busy beginning, today at verse 21 it is, thankfully, the Sabbath - a day of rest.

On this Sabbath day, Jesus and his followers gather with others in the community to worship God and to grow in faith at the synagogue... not so unlike our gathering here week by week. Jesus is the guest preacher at the synagogue today, and there is a buzz of amazement at his teaching that is beginning to spread through the congregation. Until, that is, a commotion breaks out. One in the crowd is suspicious of this new teaching, not like that of the scribes, and calls out an accusation: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

They are the first 2 questions in the Gospel of Mark and so we shouldn't be surprised that they are questions of suspicion and fear, as those are common first reactions to something new. The questions come, we're told, from "a man with an unclean spirit," the implication being that this man is possessed with some kind of evil or demonic power. It is an implication that many of our modern brains would like to dismiss as a mental illness or reach for some other kind of sensible explanation. But whether we believe in demonic possession as something real or something that can be explained away scientifically, the story is told in a way that assumes this man is not in his right mind... and that the questions come from something evil that is within but apart from him. I actually think it's a helpful and gracious metaphor, if considered judiciously, to account for the mix of good and evil in us all. Even if the only demon in this man is his suspicion and fear, isn't that enough to describe him as having an "unclean spirit"? And it is out of that unclean spirit that the man calls out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

Jesus' teaching has struck a difficult cord in the unclean spirit of this man, for in it, the unclean spirit understands that if Jesus' new teaching and new authority takes hold, then the old will pass away. Things will change. And the unclean spirit quickly realizes that this means its own time might be nearing an end. This spirit is right, for when God is present, fear and suspicion are indeed exorcised. And so the suspicion and fear from which the questions come are not crazy at all... not by a long shot... for as God, Jesus did indeed come to destroy evil! What this man knew in his spirit, unclean perhaps but also wise, was that God was in Jesus and Jesus' teaching. And so the truth comes, though spoken like an accusation: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." It seems to me a deep truth, however ironic, that it is the unclean, the evil, in us that first recognizes the holiness of Jesus... and reacts to it with fear. It is common, indeed this story seems to make it biblical, that our first reaction is to fear the change that new-ness brings, even if it is a change from unclean to clean, from judgement to grace, from death to new life.

Jesus responds to the spirit but doesn't actually answer the questions born of fear. Instead, Jesus counters the accusation of holiness by speaking from it, with a rebuke and command: "Be silent, and come out of him!" And in the face of Jesus' authority, the unclean spirit obeys... not without protest and spectacle, but still, the unclean spirit ultimately obeys, coming out of the man. And so the man is left, presumably, at peace. He drops out of the scene as the focus shifts back to the community who have been there all along, witnessing the exchange.

The people gathered at the synagogue have been part of it all: from hearing Jesus' teaching, to the confrontation with suspicion and silencing of fear, and now it is their turn to react to what they have witnessed. Like the unclean spirit, the first reaction is one of questioning, but unlike the unclean spirit, the spirit of the people is one of amazement and curiosity: "What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." The difference between the questions is remarkable. The first questions are a reaction of suspicion and fear because of knowledge... Jesus is the Holy One of God and we're afraid this means things will change. The second question is a reaction of surprise and perplexity, because of a lack of knowledge... who is this? what does it mean? what could it mean? Knowledge brings questions that fear possibility, resist change and cling to the status quo; curiosity brings questions that open up possibility, invite change and welcome new-ness. The difference is immense. The wonderment of the people carries the story along with greater engagement and interest as the desire to know and to discover grows. What will happen next?

The scene is replayed, not exactly but with great similarity in another Gospel story a few chapters later in Mark. It is another moment of fear, this time for the disciples, as they travel away from home, to the other side of the sea, at Jesus' invitation. But Jesus falls asleep in the boat, even as a storm comes up and threatens to swamp the boat. So the disciples wake Jesus up with their fearful question, so similar to that from the unclean spirit: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" They may not be suspicious that Jesus came to destroy them directly as the unclean spirit was, but then Jesus was the one to suggest the trip to foreign land on the other side of the sea. And so once again, we hear a first reaction, born of suspicion and fear, that comes out as an accusation... we are going to die, and you don't care!

Jesus' response is virtually the same as in our Gospel today, though this time the exorcism is not of a spirit in a man but in nature. Jesus rebukes the wind and commands the sea: "Peace! Be still!" Immediately, the wind and the waters obey and calm returns. And then it's

Jesus' turn to ask questions: "why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Here... always... the challenge is to faith that overcomes fear. The disciples see the obedience of the sea and wind at Jesus' command and finally the secondary response... the curiosity and awe... kick in and they wonder: "Who then is this?"

These stories today... stories throughout the biblical Gospels and throughout our lives... encourage us to move past, to move through, our fear and to find our wonderment. I wonder what would happen if... And when something takes us by surprise... a new teaching, a sudden storm, and unexpected miracle... to let our spirits respond with questions of curiosity rather than suspicion.

It is this spirit that I hope we will embody as we move through 2015 and beyond. I hope that you bring your questions to our Annual Meeting today, certainly and I hope that it doesn't stop there. I hope you bring your questions... good questions full of curiosity that open up possibility and encourage deeper conversation... to worship, to meetings, to Lenten lunches, to bible study and to dinner parties. I hope you bring questions that challenge God in times of difficulty, and that praise God in times of answered prayer. And I hope that you will encourage the questions of others, not just here at St. Andrew's but amongst your family and friends... may you hear beyond their fear or suspicion and respond instead to the deep need for understanding, for love and for healing.

May our curiosity about who God is and what God may be doing invite others into the journey as well. It begins here... at the font, where God commits to us and we commit to God. As we grow in knowledge and understanding, in the faith and love of our baptism, may our awe at God's grace drive us to spread the word about Jesus throughout the surrounding region.

Let's us now re-commit ourselves to the promises of our baptism...