

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**Preacher: Tomás Gordo-Churchill, LCMNU Student Preacher****Texts: Psalm 111 and Mark 1: 21–28****January 28, 2024**Faith over Fear

Mark 1: 21–28 opens us up to a scene of stark contrasts. On one hand, we have an image of Jesus teaching authoritatively and commanding an engaged audience. Then Jesus' captivating lesson is disrupted, and the demonic spirit, enters the room with piercing shrieks, crying out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" How does the demonic spirit approach Jesus as his true identity, the Holy One of God, when so many others like Nathaniel for example, at first take the story of Jesus, the gospel, with cynicism and skepticism; however, the demonic spirit knows because it is the one most threatened by Jesus' new teaching.

So why is the demonic spirit so afraid of this new identity and of self-destruction? Well, in this sermon, I hope to better nuance the rationale behind this demonic spirit's rather rude interruption of Jesus' election, explain the source and importance of Jesus' authority in these verses, and find a way we can let this authority into our lives.

Firstly, in order to better understand this demonic spirit, we can't forget only in verse 15 Jesus proclaims that "the time has come, the Kingdom of God has come near". While any Christian can believe this statement and find great joy in it in our 21st century discussion this past week, we are guided to find another way through Jesus. Nonetheless, instead of seeing a new way forward, this demonic spirit only sees the end of the road, when he screams "have you come to destroy us?!"^[TG1] Put most simply, a demon can be defined as a being hostile to God, and that which captures and isolates humans from their relationship with God. Therefore, when Jesus calls the Israelites to repent, to turn away from their old ways and towards God, this demonic spirit has every reason to be afraid, because it means a reunification with God.

Furthermore, not only does repenting and believing mean accepting God into one's heart, it also means dropping our false gods, or the illusions that we control everything within our sphere of influence and giving up to the authority of Jesus. Giving up to the authority means of Jesus means letting go of our fear and insecurity, the stuff that not only takes away our energy but also submits to other masters.

Nevertheless, instead of finding redemption in Jesus' authority, this demonic spirit is too afraid to let go of his fear, shrieks and cries against Jesus and in the synagogue. It not only takes a lot of guts to directly confront the "Holy One of God", but it also requires an existential fear that has captured the very core of someone's soul. Of course, I don't discount genuine fear in real threats, like that of losing your loved ones, or the fear for one's physical safety, but these are passing fears that vanish with the moment. The fear that possesses the demonic spirit stems from an all-consuming anxiety and restlessness.

One way that this anxiety and restlessness consumes us, is through misfortune. Oftentimes, the world deals us terrible situations and leaves us asking the world incessantly 'have you come to destroy us?' I can think of the time Michael fell off his bike, and then got his bike stolen, or, even more recently, when I crashed my car into a stoplight on Ridge, due to driving through an ice storm. Although I tried to maintain my calm composure after assessing the

damage, the scattered debris, the overturned stoplight, and biting -20-degree weather, all served me as a reminder that my car was doomed as well as me. It was only two weeks after I had brought my car up from home, and all I had to show for it was a missing rear-view mirror and a broken windshield. I know you all understand to some extent the feeling of regret and self-remorse that can overcome us. It can shout in your head: “oh you screwed up big time”. It’s easy to keep beating yourself up over a terrible mistake; however, Jesus calls us to repent, to turn another way. Instead of drowning in my own self-pity, I found another calling volunteering at the Concordia Place Luncheon.

Despite being tired after a sleepless night, God calls us to move forward, however weary we might be. After arriving, still feeling uneasy and slightly awkward, I finally sat down next two guys from Venezuela. They had travelled 4 months, escaping crime and repressive governments, traveling through checkpoints of corrupt cops, and after all this he tells me he is 23 years old and a father of two kids. There we were sitting in a church cafeteria, two young adults at the same stage in life, but coming from two wildly different places, talk about perspective. You see, this is what God does, he calls us to reframe the lens which we see the world. Instead of my misfortune dominating my vision, coming together with others who have fled thousands of miles from persecution and state oppression, showed me how small my problems were in comparison. Not to mention, as more and more people entered, new voices of kids, moms, and dads, my own voice condemning me for my utter failure went silent.

Here is where the power of Jesus’ new teaching lies. He doesn’t just take away our suffering or our fears, he teaches us how to leave the pain and fear dominating our lives behind as we accept a new authority in Jesus. Instead of listening to that same voice that tells us we aren’t good enough, Jesus only says “Be quiet, come out of him” to silence, and drive out this demonic spirit. Jesus breaks the cycle that would otherwise continue without him.

As the people in the synagogue ask each other with amazement, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority.” I read Jesus’ new teaching as one of faith over fear. When we have faith in God, we can finally let go of fear and restlessness, and as we faithfully acknowledge God’s omnipotence and authority over lives, we can see, with a fresh perspective, that many of the threats to our status or position in society, are merely illusions conjured up by our short-sightedness.

Looking at Psalms 111 further contextualizes what I mean by faith over fear. Here “the LORD is gracious and compassionate, He provides food for those who fear him”, in this case, fearing God is affirming and believing his infinite love and mercy, and the nourishment provided for us and, but in the same way also when we have an unceasing fear of something material, it can capture and isolate us from God.

Take for example, a topic that came up in last week’s 21theo. Anika and I asked, what do we give up when we follow God?, and someone responded: the fear of not living up to one’s potential. To some extent, we all share this fear, and when we can’t let go of this fear, then we let this image of not living up to our imagined ideal, have power over us. We let it drive us. We let it motivate us to do things that aren’t even in our best interest. In that quest to live up to one’s potential, we lose sight of who we actually are. When Psalm 111 says that fearing God is the root of all wisdom, it is really telling us that acknowledging and respecting God as the ultimate creator, turns away from primarily seeing ourselves as an incomplete version of our ideal self, but rather as a beloved part of something much greater and more complete God’s creation.

So Jesus’ new teaching calls us to give up our old ways and our fears by repenting, and to accept God’s word into our hearts by believing in the gospel, but where exactly does Jesus’

authority stem from. Obviously being the son of God helps a ton. The knowledge and confidence in God's word from that relationship alone would be enough, but it also comes from the intimate understanding of human fear and suffering at the cross. The reason Jesus can speak to those in the Synagogue with such authority in the first place is due to the sacrifice he is willing to make for his new teaching of God's word. Now eternalized in the symbol of the cross, God meets us at our weakness and suffering; however, Jesus' authority doesn't come just from the moment on the cross, but the willingness to go all the way, in service of humanity. I think of the agony in the garden, where Jesus, aware of his fate and future betrayal, goes pushes through his sorrows and fear with actions that lead to the ultimate display of bravery and sacrifice. This is how Jesus can silence and push out this demonic spirit in only 6 words, because just as this demonic soul is aware of Jesus' identity, Jesus understands our human fears. Because of this innate understanding of our fear of our own mortality, Jesus and the cross can speak and break into our hearts at our weakest points. Not only is this how Jesus commands the demonic spirit in Mark, but this empathy through the cross, is how Jesus has authority over us to this day.

Wouldn't it be quite easy for Christians, if any time we seem to be overcome by fear or anxiety, Jesus would come down and silence the voices that tell us we aren't good enough or that others may despise us. Instead, we rely on the symbol of the cross, among other reminders like our baptism and communion, as a constant reminder that our faith can triumph over our fears.

It seems like now more than ever we need to embrace our faith and learn to let go of our fears and insecurities; however, it's even more difficult to let go, when we have products that are by their very nature addictive and hard to put down: our phones. Through this device, we are exposed to a near constant stream of new information, and after so many conversations with my peers about this topic, I realized this tool has become just as isolating as the demonic spirit's fear of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue. Although we have the promise of sharing and communicating with the entire world, more and more people are too afraid to share their own story with others. Instead, I see we have a whole generation of people just consuming, watching a constant feed of posts and short-form video, a trend that only removes us from us from the world God created for us. As we compare ourselves to the best content the algorithm has to offer, It can feel like our own appearances and achievements are reduced in these false comparisons. When Jesus calls us to his teaching, I know these tarnished illusions of our world, aren't a part of it.

So how do we let go, of something that, by its nature, is inherently addictive, and built into our lives? First, I believe we can't kick any old habit unless we take on a more life-giving alternative, so I'd start with the most basic alternative, the cross. As I previously explained, the cross is a reminder that we aren't alone, that Jesus innately understands the loneliness and fear of the human condition. Therefore, when we do feel lost and struggling to stay afloat in the ocean of comparisons that social media dishes us on a daily basis, we know that God is with us, that this loneliness and fear is just an illusion. Secondly, the cross gives us a new perspective, and calls us to look for the humanity closest to us. I know not everyone had the opportunity to attend our visit to Concordia place, but the call to Sabbath, to rest every week is also a call to fellowship, as we break bread together in communion, and share meals together every Sunday. For me, these meals are a weekly reminder of my life-giving relationship with Jesus, but also with all of you. Finally, the authority of Jesus, derived from the sacrifice on the cross, is a reminder that despite our fears of letting go, God's call has the final say, even when we are trapped by our fears of losing our superficial connection to some virtual world and chained to a

never-ending feed of content. In other words, Jesus' authority shows us by example that our fears are short-lived but our faith is forever.