

Immediately

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Texts: Mark 1:21-28 (RSV)

Today, we turn to the beginning of Mark's gospel and with it to a profound sense of urgency, movement and sudden, fast-paced action that imbues all 16 chapters of Mark, and in this first one. If you were reading it in the original Greek, you'd surely notice that one of Mark's favorite words is *euthus*. It's an adverb variously translated as "immediately," "straightway," "suddenly" or "at once." He uses it 42 times throughout the gospel, 12 times in the first chapter and three times in our passage. More than any other New Testament writer, Mark is intent on showing us that Jesus' ministry happens *euthus*, with a right here, right now, you-blink-and-you-might-miss-it immediacy! Mark skips the story of Jesus' birth altogether and moves at breakneck speed through the baptism by John, where Jesus "immediately" comes out of the water, this before the Spirit "immediately" drives him into the wilderness of temptation. He moves through John's arrest and through Jesus's first preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand, as in right here and right now, through his calling of his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, who "immediately" drop their nets and follow. Next, he "immediately" calls James and John who *left their dad in the boat* to follow him. All of that in just 20 short verses that precede our text wherein Jesus comes to Capernaum and "immediately" enters the synagogue and teaches, where "immediately" there was a man there with an unclean spirit, which Jesus rebukes and draws out of him, and "at once" his fame spreads throughout the land, and this long before the days of social media. The story went viral *euthus*! At once! Immediately!

Part of me loves the relentless drive and energy we see coursing through Mark's story. And, to be honest, part of me finds it exhausting. We can barely keep up with all the action! So, what's going on here? Is Jesus in a hurry? Maybe. Does Mark have someplace else he needs to be? It's kind of seems like it! I imagine Mark saying to Luke and Matthew, come on guys, who's got time for Christmas. Chop! Chop! Let's go!

Mark's writing here reminds of an odd story about the comedian Andy Kaufman. Some of you may know it. Kaufman, a.k.a. Latka from the 70's sitcom *Taxi*, was known as a sometimes obnoxious, often eccentric and always unpredictable entertainer. One evening in 1978, at the end of a stand-up performance at Carnegie Hall, when he was all riled up and when he had the crowd all riled up, and just when they thought the show was over, he says to them all, "Now, I want to take every one here out for milk and cookies. Follow me, everyone!" And with that, Kaufman suddenly jumps off the stage and makes a beeline for the door. And do you know what? ...almost without hesitation, as in immediately, the audience follows him out the door where they are met with 20 yellow school buses that Kaufman had ordered before the show. They piled on the buses and were taken to a nearby school cafeteria on 49th street where they sat at long tables, drinking milk and eating cookies, compliments of Andy Kaufman. It's a story I can almost believe! What I have a much harder time believing is that Simon and Andrew and James and John would have so quickly, so immediately left it all to follow Jesus. God knows there would be no milk and cookies where they were heading with Jesus!

Allow me to offer a few brief suggestions for why this sense of urgency in Mark and in Jesus's ministry. First, there's the immediacy of Jesus' response to people's need, as is evidenced in our healing story for today. Jesus is constantly being interrupted, turning to those right in front of him, to respond in

love and compassion, or sometimes in righteous anger, to preach, teach or heal. With just a few exceptions, Jesus and by extension God is somehow always right there when people need him the most. Makes sense, right?

Another, related idea is that Jesus ever-ready presence and availability is intended to point to the immediate and ever-present power of God. All that euthus and sudden action is not about Jesus being in a rush to do things, see people or go places. Here the immediacy may contain a teaching and a confidence that no matter who needs who, God is right here with us, right now, always! Let's think about this. How would a persistent awareness of God's immediate presence change how we act, how we treat ourselves or others. Suddenly, a sense of "God's-got-this" calm may come over us and we may find ourselves acting with renewed courage if not efficiency. Imagine acting not out of that all-pervasive anxious or striving busyness of our American culture but instead out of steady, purposeful groundedness.

Here's yet another explanation. What if all the euthus in Mark is intended to underscore what we might call the almost constant "euthus pushback," that is, the immediate opposition, that Jesus faces when going about his ministry. His preaching, teaching and healing almost always threatens the status quo and the powers that be, evoking the ways of their indignation and the means of their imperial oppression. The gospels are full of examples that ultimately lead to his crucifixion.

Surely, it's a combination of these reasons but there's one more idea I'd like to lift up that seems especially apt given our text for today. After all, our passage is not so much about the immediacy of Jesus's action, per-se but about his authority! Those who witnessed the exorcism that day are amazed and say, "With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!" I think this is key! The authority of Jesus is what propels the action! Similarly, the authority of the Spirit is what drives Jesus into the desert for 40 days. The authority of the Spirit so alive in Jesus is what commands the disciples he has never met before to follow him, and they drop everything and go. A trustworthy authority appears on the scene, willing to disobey lesser laws as needed, and immediately, the kin-dom of God draws near and amazing acts of love and mercy and justice start happening euthus, at once!

This brings me to a question for us all. As we go about our days, busying ourselves with any number of activities, who or what authorizes our decisions about how we will spend our days or our lives? In our personal lives, we may be driven by our love for our family and so we readily let that love authorize the countless demands of our parents, siblings and children make of us. In our church lives, we may be driven by our love for this community and those who it serves. In our professional lives, we may be driven to get things done by our bosses, or our sense of fulfilling our job descriptions. All of this is fair enough. Yet I wonder how often we let the God, or the Holy Spirit or Jesus tell us what to do. How often do we hear their demands and respond with urgency? Even the question may quicken our hearts and evoke an even deeper sense of immediacy or purpose. Circling back to an earlier point, how would aligning ourselves with the immediacy of God' always right here, right now love and presence help us to respond to Christ's calls in a more centered, more deliberate, more immediate way?

I trust we'd all agree that Martin Luther King aligned himself with and relied authority of the Spirit and the authority of Jesus when he spoke those ageless words at the Lincoln monument in 1963. He said "We have... come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to

make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand's of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

Now is the time! At once! Immediately! Euthus! So often when we hear such calls to follow the ways of justice and love, we can find ourselves immobilized whether by the sheer immensity of the task at hand, or by the plethora of other competing demands - the important needs for self-care or the care and feeding of our loved ones. I like what you are saying, Jesus. I hear ya, Martin! But I'm not sure now is good time for me. Let me check my calendar and get back to you! Or, sometimes when we hear that call, or are faced with pressing demands of the poor or downtrodden, we may well be moved to spring into action and "do something." Again, I ask, who or what is authorizing these instincts within us? Is it God or Jesus, I wonder? If so, great, and there are many examples of this here in our own community, some of which we will be celebrating in two weeks when we lift up our homeless ministries! I believe that truly urgent and helpful work of caring for the unhoused in our midst is deeply aligned with God's authorizing presence! The needs are immediate, in some cases life or death, and so is the response. In other spheres though I wonder to what extent our sense of urgency for action is authorized at least in part by fear? When we are unwittingly driven to act by a fear of our own helplessness, or of not looking the part as caring people or as Christians, our actions can readily lose their integrity and intended impact!

In her article *Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism*, Sara Ahmed offers a timely example when she writes: "The impulse towards action *can* work to block hearing [about the pain of racism]. In moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move us away from...hearing. In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message 'getting through'.

Can we hear her invitation to be present, to be right here, right now, to listen first to the pain of others that is immediately before us, as Jesus did when he encountered the man in our text! Talk about a fierce urgency of now! Yet when we do so listen, when we do align ourselves in love and care, align ourselves with God's presence always right there for us and others, how much more can we then move forward with deliberate pace and purpose.

Again, it comes down to the question of who is authorizing the urgency. When we commit to join together, as our new members just did, when we covenant to follow the rule of gospel so near as God shall give us grace, we also affirm that Jesus is the center of our faith. I know there are many competing demands for that pole position, but if we let Jesus be our command and control, if we align ourselves with that authorizing power of God's always loving presence that is right here, right now, in you and in me, there is no opposition strong enough to hold us back!

Friends, lately we've been witnessing changes in our country that are happening at a dizzying speed. Not surprisingly, much of it has do with who is in charge. As of yesterday, 35 executive orders, actions or memoranda in just a week and a half. Indeed, the fierce of urgency is upon us now, as ever, and we pray our leaders continue to listen first and hear the deep economic pain, social inequality and existential grief so present in our midst right now!

Let me bite size this message and bring it home with a question for us all. What is one thing you can right now, today or tomorrow, that you can honestly say you are doing because Jesus told you to! What is one way, whether great or small, that you can let him, or God have authority to command a sense of urgency over your schedule, over your anxiety, over your striving and caring and engagement with others. With Jesus at the center, how specifically can you act with deliberate calm and embody the immediacy and authority and even supremacy of God's courageous and loving presence in your life? If you've tended towards that important yet sometimes frenzied 'do-something' activism, maybe it's hearing Jesus command to pray. Maybe you commit to ten minutes of centering prayer which means a time to decenter your thoughts, your desires and your agenda. If you've tended towards that let go and let God contemplation, or even towards a gradual, let me check my calendar approach, maybe you commit to taking some action that cares for a neighbor or joins the fight, online or in-person, for racial, economic or environmental justice. Maybe it's something different, like aligning with that higher power and connecting or reconnecting with an online recovery group. Maybe its saying thank you to someone that wouldn't expect it, or letting go of that long-held grudge, or calling an estranged in-law who still votes the other way, just to say hello and I care about you and I love you. Whatever it is, be sure to align yourself with the immediacy of God's loving, right here, right now presence. Because "Now is the time!" Now is always the time! Amen.



