

Epiphany 4

January 31, 2021

What Is Jesus Doing?

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” Now Jesus shows that that’s really true — that the reign of God is breaking into the world.

It was the Sabbath day — what we call Saturday — so Jesus went to the local synagogue. That was a common Jewish practice at the time and still is today. The Sabbath was the day to hear the scriptures read and a sermon about the reading, to pray and to praise God. But that wasn’t always the case.

Long before the time of Jesus, the seventh day of the week was seen in many of the cultures of the Near East as an unlucky day, and one on which work shouldn’t be done. The people of Israel apparently shared with their non-Israelite neighbors the idea of not working on that day. But for Israel, it took on a distinctive meaning. It was one of the Ten Commandments — “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” No work was to be done on that day. We might paraphrase that very loosely and say, “Thou shalt not be a workaholic,” which is a good reminder for many of us. You can’t ensure your safety, health and happiness by working 24/7.

By the time of the New Testament, quite detailed rules had been developed

about just what kinds of work were forbidden on the Sabbath and what kinds might be allowed. Regulations were added beyond those in scripture in order to, in the Jewish parlance, “put a fence around the Torah” — to make sure that no one even got close to violating God’s commandments.

As time went on, Sabbath observance became a very important mark of distinction for the Jews. It was the normal day for attending the service in the local synagogue. And it was connected with God’s rest on the seventh day of the week in which he created the world, according to the first creation account in Genesis. The Sabbath rest of Israel remembered and honored God’s Sabbath rest.

So, there’s nothing unusual about Jesus being in the synagogue on this day. It’s perhaps a bit surprising that he’s already teaching there since this is right at the beginning of his ministry, but we really don’t know what kind of formal preparation he might have had or what would have been required at the time. Then, however, something surprising does happen. There is a man possessed by a demon there — more on that soon — and Jesus casts out the demon and heals the man. His teaching is not just speech but action, and the people are amazed at the authority he shows.

To appreciate what is happening here we need to step back a bit and look at the big picture. This is the first of six different occasions in the gospels on which Jesus heals someone of an affliction on the Sabbath. On this first

occasion, no one seems to have any objection to what he does, but in all the other cases Jesus is accused of violating the Sabbath by doing the work of healing on that day. That was allowed if a person was in immediate danger of death, but in none of the instances in the gospels was that the case. And as one of his critics says, there are six other days of the week when people can come to be healed.

Why are so many of Jesus' healings done on the Sabbath? It's not just coincidence, because the gospel writers deliberately chose these stories and made a point of telling us that they took place on the Sabbath. With other stories of Jesus' healings, we're not told that they were on Monday or Thursday or whatever day.

Certainly, we should keep in mind Jesus' desire to help people in need. The gospels speak of his compassion for sufferers and his impatience with those who would put the rules people imposed ahead of human need. But that doesn't explain the emphasis on the Sabbath.

Was Jesus deliberately being provocative, making an "in your face" gesture to show that he didn't care about the law of Moses? No, while Jesus wasn't legalistic, he respected the law and he didn't go out of his way to offend people. It seems there was something else going on here. And there was. That "something" is the kingdom of God which is breaking into the world.

The seventh day of creation means more than just one short period back at the beginning of history. It is the completion of God's purposes in creation. God "rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." But Genesis doesn't say God stopped working permanently. If that were the case, the world wouldn't continue to exist. "My Father is still working, and I also am working," Jesus said at another time when he was criticized for healing on the Sabbath.

God did not create a changeless world in the beginning, but a world that was intended to have a history — to develop over the course of time. God is not resting now but continues to sustain the world and work in it through the natural processes he has created. Science enables us to understand quite well how those processes take place, but we still pray for food and healing and other necessities of life, believing that God works in and through natural forces.

And God directs the world toward the goal God intends for it, because creation is not pointless or without meaning. That goal, that completion of God's creative work, is what the people of Israel came to call the kingdom of God. It is the age of the Messiah, symbolized by the Sabbath of the creation story. It will be the time when all the powers that threaten creation, all the pains and ills that afflict God's creatures, will be vanquished and done away with. It is the time that prophets of Israel looked toward; this verse from

Isaiah is an example:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

Every Sabbath, every seventh day of the week, is a pointer to God's future Great Sabbath, the messianic age. And if that is the case, the Sabbath was not the wrong time but precisely the right time for the Messiah to begin his healing work. That starts in the synagogue at Capernaum. Whether we think of demon possession as an attack on a person by real agents of evil in rebellion against God or as the way people in the first century thought of mental illness, it is something that threatens God's good creation. And Jesus begins his healing work by doing away with it. He will continue through his ministry to do that by forgiving sins and healing the lame, blind and those with other ailments. It is a sign that the kingdom of God really is breaking into the world.

After he was crucified because of his proclamation of the kingdom of God and his work for it, Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week. This was such a radically new thing that Christians very early began to gather for worship on the first day of the week, our Sunday. In that sense, it took the place of the Sabbath, but it wasn't simply a matter of rescheduling. Sunday was sometimes spoken of as the eighth day, the day of God's new

creation — or it might be better to say God's renewal of creation. With Jesus' death and resurrection, the world's history is turned back toward the goal God intended.

The fullness of the kingdom of God lies ahead, but in the gospel story of Jesus, we are shown what the Kingdom of God is like. And in the words of the old hymn, we are "bound for the promised land." But we are not just being carried along passively. We are called to be the instruments God uses to continue the healing of the world, putting into effect what Jesus accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. That's one of the reasons Good Shepherd exists - to be instruments of God's healing on the world. Let us ALL continue

that work. Yes, that means YOU and ME!!

Amen.