

**Sermon for 1-28-17; Mark 1:21-28**  
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{hissed/growled in my most demonic speaking voice}

*'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!'*<sup>i</sup>

If you are expecting a sermon about exorcism or 'spiritual warfare' this morning, let me take this opportunity to apologize. That is not what you'll be getting in this church. The confrontation between Jesus and this "unclean spirit"<sup>ii</sup> is dramatic, and it certainly captures our attention. But there's something even more important going on here, as described by the witnesses in the synagogue: "What is this? A new teaching -- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."<sup>iii</sup>

This story, like all our Gospel readings this season, is from Mark's Gospel. Biblical scholars agree that Mark's is the oldest of the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and that fragments of Mark's text were used by Matthew and Luke. John is an altogether different story, but we won't get into that today. The point is that Mark is the oldest of our four Gospel accounts, and that Mark's text was circulating and spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ before the other three. Mark's text also contains no birth narrative -- no choirs of angels, no baby in a manger. The Gospel of Mark begins with an adult Jesus being baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River.

And why am I telling you all this? Because it has to do with authority; namely, Jesus's authority as the Messiah, the Son of God. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell of his special birth -- of a virgin mother, with a father descended from King David, in the town of Bethlehem, proclaimed by a star. This miraculous birth is a fulfillment of words spoken by the great Jewish prophets Isaiah and Micah. The circumstances of Christ's birth, then,

establish his authority as the Messiah before he even takes his first breath of air as a newborn baby.

But Mark doesn't include those details. The Gospel of Mark begins with grown-up Jesus. He is baptized, he calls his disciples, and he enters the synagogue to teach -- and that's where we are in today's reading. This is his first recorded teaching. Each of the Gospel writers is working to establish Christ's authority, to convince people that this Jesus guy was in fact the Lord and King, the Alpha and Omega, the Anointed One. Mark's account of this episode in the synagogue is meant to persuade those who read and hear the text that yes, Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Christ.

Even before the unclean spirit makes his appearance, Mark tells us that the men listening to Jesus in the synagogue were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."<sup>iv</sup> There is something *different* about the way Jesus teaches.

Think back to your school days (or think of your school days, for those of you still in school). Did you ever have a teacher who kept you absolutely riveted? A teacher whose knowledge and ability to share that knowledge inspired you? A teacher who opened your eyes and mind to new ways of thinking and new things to explore? I had a few professors like that in seminary -- those were the ones where we all lingered 15 or 20 minutes after class had ended because we were too fascinated and engaged to go home. I also had one or two professors who were not particularly passionate about their work, who did not capture my attention -- those were the ones where, if we lingered at all after class, it was only because we had fallen asleep in our chairs and were unaware that the professor had stopped speaking.

No one was nodding off while Jesus taught in the synagogue that day. His teaching was so unique, so captivating that the men were astounded; and more than astounded -- they began to see that his authority was unlike any other they had encountered. This Jesus was no regular religious teacher. He was the real deal.

It's in the midst of this dawning realization that the man with the unclean spirit speaks up. The spirit, or demon -- whatever you want to call it, it is a force opposing God that has somehow controlled this man -- the spirit is threatened. It recognizes Jesus as the Christ, and it is afraid. If I were this demon, I'd be afraid too, to see standing before me the only One who could put an end to my tyranny, my poisonous control of a man's soul.

*"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"<sup>v</sup>* And it did.

"He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."<sup>vi</sup> The men in the synagogue have witnessed a miracle. This Jesus has an authority unlike anything they (or we) have seen before or will ever see again. Only the Messiah can open our eyes and hearts and minds and cast out the demons that separate us from God's will for us.

And what are those demons? They are the forces that take hold of us, that possess us, that undermine our full humanity and make us seem less than the reflections of God's perfect image we are meant to be. Demons can be very persuasive. They trick us into believing that we are weak, or defective, or irredeemable.

We all struggle with unclean spirits. Not little red imps that hop around with tiny pitchforks. Our unclean spirits are the forces that pull us away from the path of Christ. Christ calls us to be peacemakers; unclean spirits sow discord and violence. Christ calls us to love our neighbors; unclean spirits promote suspicion and selfishness. Christ calls us to forgive; unclean spirits thrive on grudges and vengeance. Christ tells us not to worry, that every hair on our heads is counted; unclean spirits whisper that we must work harder and look better and earn more to be worthy of love.

I have my demons; I'm sure you have yours. But we need not fear, because our unclean spirits don't stand a chance against the Good News of Jesus Christ. Grace and mercy and wholeness are ours for the taking, because he gives them to us, just as he gives himself for us. Our experiences of restoration, of freedom from our personal demons, are not always as quick or dramatic as in today's Gospel reading; but they are no less life-changing.

There is much Good News here for us today -- first, that we are not our demons. We are so much more than the ugliest parts of ourselves. Jesus sees us and knows us for who we really are -- precious creations of God. Christ looked at the man in the synagogue that day and saw past the ugliness to the essential goodness of a child of God. In our moments of greatest despair, when we feel utterly alone, when we can see no light at the end of our tunnels of struggle and sadness, we must remember that for us, just as for the man in the synagogue, Christ changes everything. Christ's authority is our refuge, our balm, and our strength. There are, of course, other great teachers and thinkers and leaders, others who have changed the world, others of importance and authority. But the authority of the Messiah, the authority on display that day in the synagogue, is unlike any other.

I struggled with finding the right words to end this message. I wanted to end with a powerful proclamation of Christ's authority, but I could think of nothing to capture or express the singular magnitude of his essence. There are, quite literally, no words.

Then I remembered an anecdote about the famed British essayist and poet Charles Lamb... Lamb was arguing with some of his literary peers (like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth) about the difference between Christ's greatness and that of other great men and heroes of years past. He convinced his friends with the following simple illustration:

"[Gentlemen], if Shakespeare were now to enter this room we should all stand up to do him honor; but if Jesus of Nazareth were to come in, we should all fall down and kiss the hem of his garment."<sup>vii</sup>

The nature of Christ's authority, which saved a man's soul on that Sabbath day so long ago, cannot be perfectly defined in words. Nor can it be fully understood in the mind. But it can, without a doubt, be known and felt in the depths of our hearts. Thanks be to God for that! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:24 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> 1:23

<sup>iii</sup> 1:27

<sup>iv</sup> 1:22

<sup>v</sup> 1:25

<sup>vi</sup> 1:27

<sup>vii</sup> p. 13 in *The Bible in Shakspeare* by William Burgess (1903)