

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2021
 “The Ultimate Authority” (Mark 1:21-28)

The setting for today’s gospel text is the synagogue. The people gathered there experience two remarkable things. First, Jesus’ teaching leaves them astounded and, then, his casting out of an unclean spirit leaves them dumbfounded.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus has already been baptized by John, where he received God’s seal of approval. He has already passed the test in the wilderness by resisting Satan’s temptations. He has chosen a band of disciples. And today we see him launching his campaign. He is in Capernaum and it is the Sabbath, the day set aside to worship God.

Jesus is naturally drawn to the synagogue where the people of God are gathered. Because there was generally no permanent rabbi or teacher, it was customary for the synagogue leader to ask visiting teachers to speak. On this day, he invites Jesus to do so, and Jesus accepts the invitation.

As he teaches, those in attendance notice that the atmosphere changes drastically. His teaching is like a new revelation, and Mark tells us they are astonished. The reason for their astonishment is that Jesus speaks with an authority that they have never before witnessed. Other scribes merely read the text and enumerate the many laws surrounding that passage. In order to give their words authority, they quote the prophets and other great teachers who have gone before them. They speak on the authority of others.

But Jesus speaks on his own authority and the scriptures are opened like never before. The other rabbis know a lot *about* God and that is what they teach. But Jesus teaches as if he *knows* God; as if he knows the heart and mind of God personally and intimately. The people immediately sense the difference. They, of course, could not know why Jesus speaks so intimately about God. They don’t yet know that Jesus, himself, is God incarnate – God in the flesh. But this is why his teaching carries such authority. The people are astounded because it is as if God himself is standing there in front of them. It seems that what Jesus speaks is more than words. He offers them the quiet assurance of God’s love and care for them. Instead of all the legalism espoused by the scribes, they hear the truth of God’s grace. And it is spoken with an authority that is unmatched. That’s the first remarkable thing in today’s text: how this new teacher is able to keep his audience spellbound.

As Jesus continues to teach, the people are riveted to his words. They are sitting on the edge of their seats. You can hear a pin drop. Then out of nowhere, a tortured scream shatters the silence. *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Are you here to destroy us?* The startled people look around to find this man, ranting and raving like a crazy person, waving his arms as he shouts. *I know who you are, the Holy One of God!*

I want to pause the story here to point out a few interesting things. First, the demon or unclean spirit, identifies Jesus. He knows who Jesus is when everyone else sees him only as a great teacher. In fact, we have to go much deeper into Mark’s gospel before we find a human being making the confession that Jesus is the Son of God. But this demon knows who Jesus is.

Second, the unclean spirit recognizes the dual nature of Jesus. He knows that Jesus is a man: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?* But he also recognizes that Jesus is divine: *I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* For centuries, the church wrestled with Jesus' humanity and divinity. How could he be both human and divine, both God and man at the same time? But this demon recognizes it immediately.

Third, what we're seeing here is the first clash of power between the forces of good and evil in Jesus' ministry. Of course, Jesus encountered Satan in the wilderness, but Luke tells us that when Jesus did not yield to the temptations Satan put before him, that Satan departed from him until an opportune time. That set the stage for what was to come. Satan would always be nearby, trying to undermine Jesus' ministry and keep the people distanced from God.

That's what's happening here. Jesus is speaking with authority about the love and grace and forgiveness of God, when this demon – this force of evil – calls out from the man whom he has possessed, hoping to divert the attention of this spellbound audience away from Jesus and perhaps undermine his authority in the process.

I can imagine a chilling fear – almost a panic – gripping the crowd. For in Jesus' day, people believed in demons. They believed these demons inhabited dark and unclean places. If a person wasn't careful around dark, shadowy, and unclean places, a demon might pounce on them. And these demons were believed to cause all kinds of illnesses. Everything from blindness to epilepsy, from plagues to mental illness was blamed on demons. So the people in the synagogue are frightened. This evil demon has infiltrated their holy space.

But Jesus seems undisturbed; unmoved by the outburst. He looks the man in the eye, almost as if he has been expecting this moment, and issues a direct order. There is no fear in his voice. No trepidation or hesitation. And no doubt about the outcome. Just the order: *Be still and come out of him!* Jesus isn't speaking to the man, per se, but to something within the man. After the order is given, there is a struggle that causes the man to convulse, a loud shriek, and then the man stands there quietly, at peace. And those gathered there for worship are even more stunned. Jesus not only talks about God – and the love and care God displays – he actually brings it about in someone's tortured life.

They have just witnessed a clash of power between the forces of good and evil, and good has triumphed. Evil flees in the presence of Jesus' purity. And the people are astounded. Jesus' authority is more than the official authority of the religious leaders of his time. It is an inner authority that comes from a pure and powerful connection with God.

Now I know this story seems somewhat out of place in our modern and enlightened world. Demon possession is the stuff of horror movies. Modern science would be able to offer an explanation of just what this man's suffering was from. Yet if we look a little deeper, there are some powerful issues that speak to our lives today.

We might often picture evil as a funny little creature in red tights with a pitchfork in hand; yet we know that the forces of evil surround us. All we have to do is turn on the news. There we hear

reports about the evils of a global pandemic, domestic and international terrorism, telephone and internet scams, murder and rape, rioting and looting, child abuse...and the list goes on.

We also know that these forces are not always external. Sometimes we experience a clash of forces internally. We encounter this every time we hear ourselves saying, *I shouldn't have done that. I know better* or *Why did I say that? That's not really like me.*

The Apostle Paul certainly understood the internal clash of forces. Remember his words from Romans: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* That describes Paul's clash of forces, the battle between the good Paul and the sinful Paul. And it acknowledges that frequently the good Paul loses.

The struggle between what is good and what is not good – both in the outer world and the inner worlds – points to a deep and basic struggle between good and evil that has been a part of humanity since the beginning of time. We want to do what is good and right, but something within us pushes us in the other direction and we end up doing the very things we don't want to do. And once we go so far, it becomes easier to go even further.

There have been times in my life – and I suspect in yours as well – when it would have been a wonderful thing to have Christ say something to the evil forces inside of me, *Be quiet and come out of him!* and sent that destructive force packing. That would make life so much easier. Even though we may not have experienced this clash of forces as powerfully as portrayed in Mark's gospel, we can be assured that Christ can bring us the same kind of freedom as he did to that tortured man. Christ has the power to overcome the destructive forces in our lives, whether they be prejudice, lust, jealousy, envy, or the desire to control our own destiny. For in the presence of his purity, evil flees and peace follows. In the struggle between right and wrong, the presence of Christ assures us of the outcome. And as we build our relationship with the One who has ultimate authority – the One who loves us best – we build his strength into our inner lives.

An old Native American tale recounts the story of a chief who was telling a gathering of young braves about the struggle within. *It is like two dogs fighting inside of us, the chief told them. There is one good dog that wants to do the right and the other dog always wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight.* That's when a young brave spoke up and asked, *Who is going to win in the end?* The chief responded, *The one you feed.*

Which one will you and I feed? May God grant us the nearness of Christ and the power of his Spirit as we deal with the clash of powerful forces in our lives. Amen.