

Mark 1:21-28
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 28, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “They questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority!’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Here we are on the fourth of five Sundays between the bookends of the Epiphany season, and we’re still in the first chapter of the gospel accounts... because – in the two gospels that don’t talk about Jesus’ birth – the first chapters speak so much of the establishment of His mission and ministry. Three Sundays ago, in Mark 1, Jesus was being identified in His baptism as the one for the mission. Two Sundays ago, in John 1, Jesus was calling sinners to believe His mission. Last week, returning to Mark 1, Jesus was calling certain believers to be students of His mission, who would one day fish for men. Today, *still* in Mark 1, the focus is on Jesus’ *authority* to do any of that calling and complete all of this mission.

And, to focus on that authority of Jesus, our text wraps itself around a *very* short confrontation between Jesus and the unclean spirits, they whose leader once in the garden tempted the woman to question the Lord’s ‘teaching with authority’, and our text bookends this confrontation between Jesus and the unclean spirits with an important refrain, that Jesus brings a *new* teaching with authority.

First, let's consider the brief encounter: the unclean spirit cries, "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."

The evil spirits are not stupid. They know what's going on, far better than do we. Where we with Nathanael ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth, come out of the humble stature of the Messiah, come out of the lowly veiled ways in which God chooses to work?", the spirits see much more clearly: "I know who you are – the Holy One of God." That's a confession of *terrified respect*!

How shallowly at times we understand and respect the holiness of God: We are perhaps like those who went to the synagogue that day... we're not expecting anything extraordinary, certainly not to come before God enfleshed. Even though we're taught the divine truth all throughout life – how often do we come before the holy God, who created heaven and earth and all powers and principalities therein, and we approach him without any fear or trembling that he knows our sin, knows the selfishness of our mind and the idolatry of our heart, and we actually grow weary and distracted over the course of 70 whole minutes before Him because we're not 'captivated' by the humble means of veiled glory. "This is the stuff of lowly no-good Nazareth," we tell ourselves and are often tempted by the devil's minions to go our way.

But the unclean spirits tempt us in such ways specifically because they know better: as soon as they are in his midst, they

tremble in His presence and are terrified of his clout over them. “The Holy One of God”, they confess to us concerning him. “If you don’t know who is in your midst, if you won’t listen to the prophets and apostles and pastors and Scriptures, then we are compelled to confess openly to you – this is the Holy One of God!”

In the text, Jesus rebukes the spirit. “Be muzzled” is the literal translation, “and come out of him.”

Sometimes we wonder about His strategy: “*Why*, Lord, would You muzzle them? Why not let them speak, Jesus, so that everyone knows who You are?” But Christ doesn’t depend upon the spirits, for if we must listen to them regarding *Him*, then to what else from them will we listen? Test the spirits, to know if they are from God. And, if they are not, then do not be deceived that they can be ‘somewhat’ helpful. Christ doesn’t need the help of “partially helpful.” He doesn’t honor “the ends justify the means” way of thinking. Christ knows not only His mission and purpose, but also His chosen means to that end. In short, as the Holy One of God, he has *authority*, and this brief show of it manifests the refrain that serves as bookends – he taught as one having authority.

St. Mark wants us to meditate upon this: the *authority* of Jesus. What does that mean? Why is it relevant to us 2000 years later? How does it *govern* our daily lives and impact our understanding of life in this fallen world?

The word for *authority* is *ἐξουσία*; some translate it as “power,” but that doesn’t do it justice. *Power*, from *δύναμις* (dynamite), refers to ability, strength. But *authority* is more than power and ability; it is also the right and the freedom to exercise that power.

When the gospels highlight Jesus’ *authority*, they’re highlighting Jesus’ *divinity* – that Jesus (and He *alone*) has not only power but the authority in His mission to bring the kingdom of God. Even faithful synagogue leaders were compelled to yield to such truth. “He taught with authority, not as the scribes,” our text says. That’s an important distinction: the scribes were *authorized* (by someone greater) to teach. But that’s different than someone who himself has and is the authority. Or, as we heard last week, a pastor is called/authorized to preach and teach, but not as one who has freedom and right to wield the Holy Scriptures however he pleases. Rather, a pastor preaches as a *bondservant* of Christ, as one not self-made, but *called, authorized* (by someone greater) to be a fisher of men.

But, where a pastor’s proclamation is bound to the Scriptures, the Scriptures are (if you will) bound to, defined by, Christ: “You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life, but these are they that speak of Me,” He says. Christ handles the Scripture with absolute authority; He and He

alone is able to speak authoritatively of their fulfillment: “Truly, truly, I say to you,” he tells all who have ears to hear.

Jesus comes teaching as one who has authority, not as the scribes, so that all must confess, “A new teaching with authority!” Now, we must discern that carefully. Our text does not intend to mean that Christ teaches apart from the Scripture, contradicts the Scripture, or usurps the Scripture. How many come claiming they teach with a new ‘angle’ or ‘twist’ supposedly divinely-given, and they point us away from the Word of Truth, twisting and perverting it to meet their whim. Who has given the myriad of sectarian church bodies the freedom and right to belittle Holy Baptism or say “This is My body” doesn’t mean “This is My Body”? Who has given Rome or the Eastern Church authority to interpret the Bible according to their Tradition and bishops? Who has given anyone authority to say, “Now the Scriptures approve of homosexual union as marriage, or transgendered as God’s alternative to the cis-gendered”? Is this the ‘made-up’ authority Christ claims for himself and the ministry He sends in His name? – to teach contrary to Scripture? Not remotely. To argue that Christ would bring a ‘new teaching’ to (not intended by) the Scriptures is to say the Word disagrees with the Word!

In claiming “a new teaching with authority,” the focus isn’t that Christ is saying anything contradictory, but that He speaks authoritatively regarding what *has* been (the Old Testament) and He now preaches and teaches with an authority that brings the Old into

completion in the New: “Behold, I make all things new.” Again, “I have not come to *abolish* the Old (the Law and Prophets), but to *fulfill* it.” Again, “This cup is the *new* testament in my blood.” He has not only the power and ability to speak thus, but the freedom and right as the Holy One of God to speak thus... to speak authoritatively to muzzle sin, death, and the power of the devil... and to make their downfall come to pass.

This is what we so often fail to see: that Christ’s authority – his freedom, right, and reign – is not used to govern us in a constrictive binding sense, but He ‘governs us’ in the sense that His authority is constantly over those things which threaten our own lives. We say, “Yes, He has authority in the Bible!” But we simultaneously are tempted to say, “No authority over my life.” But Christ’s enemies are those enemies which threaten not the Bible’s accuracy or Jesus’ completed mission, but threaten our daily lives. **The power of the devil?** Christ’s authority over him is made known in our reading; yet, Luther also teaches us to pray “Thy will be done,” knowing that the Lord will break and hinder every plan and purpose of the devil and defend us from all evil.

The enemy we often convince ourselves Christ may *not* have authority over is **physical death**: “O Lord,” we cry, “if you have the power and authority to overcome death, why would you allow us to suffer so? Why allow my loved one to be taken from me? Why allow me to endure frailty of days, the futility of this life, and the grave?”

Have we become like the evil spirits, who – even in their trepidation – wanted to thwart Christ’s plans and means to that end? Yes, we – even when we know we depend on Christ – want him to be accountable to *our* means to the end! “Do it my way, Christ, *then* I’ll be content with your gospel.”

But, who gave *you* authority – freedom and right – regarding the overcoming of death? Does not God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – *own* that right and speak of his means to an end *this* way: “Dust you are and unto dust you shall return.” But again, with authority, he promises, “This is the Father’s will, that I will lose nothing He has given me, but will raise it up on the last day.” Most certainly, Christ has authority over physical death. And in that divine freedom and right and privilege, the Lord’s plans do not include *escape* from physical death, but *resurrection* from it unto life everlasting.

And, that resurrection manifests Christ’s authority not just over death and the devil, but over *sin*! Yes, he had the *power* to overcome sin on our behalf, but also the *authority* – the freedom and right – to overcome sin by His sacrifice: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay my life down and authority to take it up again.” And again, “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth *to forgive sins*...” There he is, exercising his authority for us. That’s salvation by grace alone... that Christ who was *able* also was *willing*, also used his

rights and privileges and authority, not for his benefit, but for ours –
 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me;
 therefore, make disciples, baptizing and teaching them all things
 whatsoever.”

As joyous and awestruck as we may be that Christ would use his authority for us, sometimes we grow weary of it. We may want authority to live daily life however we think is best... care-free, cross-free... but Christ knows his plans and purpose. Even if those plans include a return to the dust to teach us to look ahead to everlasting life, they also *include* that everlasting life already given the adopted of God: “To those who believed on his name he gave them the *exousia* – the right, the authority – to become children of God,” so that (St. John would write) “we are God’s children now. What we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

So then, we can be content with how Christ wields his authority now, even if it’s not as glorious as we want... more humbly and lowly than we would want. Then again, perhaps we should listen to the people of Old, who had the ‘unveiled’ (less-veiled) glory of God and *feared* it greatly! They had the signs and wonders in Egypt; they had the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night; they had the manna from heaven, the serpent on the pole, the water from a rock. And we *envy* them for beholding the glory of God through such

signs! But what does Moses remind them in our Old Testament reading:

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet... from your brothers – to him you shall listen – just as you desired of the LORD your God... when you said, “Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.””

The people of Old learned the hard way that we sinners cannot handle the unveiled glory of God, but ought cherish and yearn for his veiled ways. And God *confirmed* what they had learned. Moses tells them, “And the LORD said to me, “The people are right in what they have spoken.” Hear that? The LORD agreed with them – “You can’t endure my glory. You *need* One who will come in veiled fashion. Christ comes behind water ...and bread and wine... and the spoken word... not because *his authority* is weak or questionable, but because *your frail frame* is.”

We need the Holy One to come in veiled majesty. So then, the Lord hears our need and says, “I will raise up for them a prophet like Moses (better!), and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” *All that I command him.* As Jesus says, “All authority has been given to me... therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them *all things I have commanded you*” ... the authority of the Holy One to bestow grace and life upon sinners everywhere.

And there's the joy of this new teaching with authority.

Veiled to us, but clear as day to the unclean spirits who must confess His Holy Name... There's Christ exercising his freedom and right to bestow His gospel upon us... which even the demons, death and sin itself must obey.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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