

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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Date: January 31, 2021 Year B, 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Mark 1:21-28

Title: What kind of authority is this?

Focus: What kind of power and authority did/does Jesus have and how does he use that?

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

“Unclean Spirit?”

This story from Mark’s gospel begins predictably enough:

- Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum, a village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. It was not far from Bethsaida, which was mentioned in the reading last week, the hometown of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John.
- It was the sabbath, and they went to the temple, and Jesus began teaching.

All of that sounds like expected, regular stuff, right? Then what happens next?

- “²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an **unclean spirit** . . .”

That’s when the story may cause us to think about images like a Halloween movie. The story begins with Jesus teaching in the synagogue and then he’s calling out and casting out an unclean spirit. This man is possessed, and this unclean spirit names Jesus and Jesus talks with it.

- What’s going on in this story? What is an unclean spirit?
- Does that seem too wacky and too weird for us to relate to?

How does this first century construct translate to our 21st century understanding of mental and physical illness? Is that what it is—some kind of illness? If it is mental or physical illness of some kind that is being described here, then we sure don’t call that an “unclean spirit.”

- **We'll come back to this idea**—so that we can frame or define what's an “unclean spirit.”

But for now, let's back up a bit in the story: Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. What was the response of the people? Did you pick up on that?

- “²²They were **astounded** at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Even before there was this confrontation with the unclean spirit possessing this man, the people noticed something different about Jesus. He spoke as one with *authority*.

And that's how the opening of Mark's gospel presents Jesus—as one with authority. Remember the reading from last week from Mark? The passage from last week, verses 14-20, comes right before this one. In that passage, Jesus called brothers Simon Peter and Andrew and then James and John (also brothers). As far as we know, at least from Mark, there is no mention of Jesus interacting with these people before. They may have heard about him, but we don't know that. What we do see as presented by gospel writer Mark is the compelling nature of the call. It happened *immediately*, for instance. Simon and Andrew responded *immediately* (vv. 16-18). Then, *immediately* Jesus called James and John (v. 19-20). “. . . and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Think about it: Jesus commands men, who have never met him before, to drop everything they are doing, leave their families and the life as they know it and follow him. And no one objects; they hear that call, and they respond.

“Mark, why did they do that?” we might want to ask. Mark doesn't provide enough detail for us to know. He just demonstrates that there was something compelling about Jesus. Or, to use the insight from this week's text, Jesus had **authority** like no one they had seen before. In this week's reading, Jesus enters a place of worship and assumes a position of authority there--he teaches.

“What was Jesus teaching?” Well, we can't answer that either. What's interesting is that the gospel fails to mention what exactly he taught. By that omission, it appears that the *content* is not important to the gospel writer. What is important (by what is included) is how Jesus is perceived or received by the audience. He is the one whose authority is more compelling than the scribes. Scribes carried a lot of authority in the Jewish communities; they were educated religious elite. Jesus is presented as “bigger and better” than they.

Power and Authority in the two primary readings

Power and authority are themes that are common to both the first reading from Deuteronomy and the gospel text from Mark.

- In the most general definition, **power is the ability to do something** or act in a particular way.
 - Can I lift 25 pounds over my head?
 - Can I accomplish a particular task?

A sociologist, a scholar who studies the way people and groups interact, would be more specific about the social dimensions of power and authority:

- **Power** is the ability to exercise one's will over others.¹
- **Authority** is power that is legitimized or conferred or *authorized* by others. It's accepted power—power that people agree to follow; it's by their consent.

Power Experienced by the Israelites

- How were people accustomed to seeing power exercised? Let's take a closer look at the readings and their settings.

In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to the Israelite people. They have been wandering in the desert for 40 years and are anticipating going into the promised land. Moses has led them out of slavery in Egypt, where the power they saw exercised by the Pharaoh was sitting on a throne and exploiting people for personal gain. "The pharaoh made the laws, owned all the land in Egypt, collected taxes, and made war or defended the country against aggression."² The Pharaoh could do what the Pharaoh wanted.

In the book of Exodus, the Pharaoh is described as directing that the Israelites be treated harshly: They were oppressed by forced labor. The Egyptians were ruthless in imposing tasks. (See Exodus 1:11-14).

By the time of this reading from Deuteronomy, after generations chafing under the power of Pharaoh in Egypt, they are now free.

There is a reference in the text to Horeb, which is also known as Mt. Sinai. It's their place of encounter with God. It's the place where, through Moses, they received the 10 Commandments, not to force them into a submissive relationship in which they would continue to be exploited, but through which they could grow to know and love God and love and serve neighbor.

Jesus and Power and Authority

Let's get back to the reading from Mark and this encounter in the temple with the man with the "unclean spirit."

¹ German sociologist Max Weber, 1922. As cited in "Power and Authority" Lumen Learning Introduction to Sociology. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sociology/chapter/power-and-authority/>

² "Pharaoh" entry in *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

<https://www.ancient.eu/pharaoh/#:~:text=As%20supreme%20ruler%20of%20the,the%20gods%20and%20the%20people.&text=As%20'Lord%20of%20the%20Two,defended%20the%20country%20against%20a%20aggression.>

I said specifically that we'd come back to this term of the "unclean spirit." As odd as this encounter may sound to us, I don't know that we need to get hung up on what to call the destructive force which has overtaken this person. We can observe what's going on in the text:

- Something has overtaken this person, something has control over him. He seems powerless. . .
- There is a force that has broken the wholeness that God intends—it's called an unclean spirit here. But we don't have to call it that.

This ancient worldview that attributes illness to unclean spirits sounds medically or scientifically outdated to us. At the same time, we can recognize the enduring truth the story conveys: The story implicitly confirms that evil is real. There is a destructive force or power at work which can harm individuals, communities, and bonds within larger entities. We don't have to call it "demon possession," but we can acknowledge that there are forces which bind us or seek to control us:

We can recognize destructive influences which affect us individually and across relationships: What forces would seek to control us?

- Jealousy and envy?
- Greed and self-centered ideas of success?
- Fear and self-protection?

Are we bound by or caught up in

- Addictions?
- Situations where power is abused, or harassment and discrimination are tolerated?

If the term "unclean spirit" makes us think of Hollywood movies depicting spinning heads and vomiting as the representation of evil, maybe we could think in more realistic, everyday ways of those forces that are opposed to God's will: How is power used?

- Does it curse or bless?
- Does it tear down or build up?
- How does it behave toward others? Does it bad-mouth or encourage? and
- Does it seek to split or draw us together?

The conflict set up in this encounter is between the evil that intends to take over and harm this man and the power that Jesus represents to confront that evil and free him from it. The gospel proclaims that Jesus has power and authority over even the most destructive powers that could threaten to take us over.

Closing: What's the Good News in this passage for us?

One last thing to point out and think about:

- When we write or speak or when we read something prepared by someone else, we tend to open with what's most important or what we want people to pay the most attention to.
- Mark begins his gospel with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).
 - There is Jesus' baptism by John and the declaration that this is God's son, the beloved. . .
 - There is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness;
 - Then the call of the disciples from last week.
- Mark had all kinds of stories he could have inserted as the first thing to highlight the beginning of Jesus' public ministry: **Why do you suppose he relayed this one as Jesus' first public act?**

Here's where I think the good news is for us: Most of us are likely discouraged right now by all the limitations that we experience. We're likely to spend more time thinking about the things we *can't* do rather than the things we *can*.

Mark presents Jesus as one who has both power and authority and who exercises that power not for personal gain or elevation of self above others, but to directly oppose the forces of evil that would harm another person.

We might get discouraged by limitations and the things we can't do, but in this encounter, Mark highlights a single act of resistance and healing which bring peace and wholeness to this one person. Jesus opposes those things which rob God's children of life. At the very beginning of his gospel, Mark declares that Jesus is one who uses his power for the sake of others to oppose the forces of evil which would seek to harm us.

Closing Prayer: May this be our prayer. . .

- May God rescue us from the forces of evil and destruction that pervade our lives. May God use us to help bring about the blessing, healing, and peace which God intends. Amen.³

³ Adapted from a prayer by David Lose posted at *In the Meantime* for April 30, 2012. <https://www.davidlose.net/2012/04/mark-1-21-28-2/>