

Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4B + January 28, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Authority

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:27: "And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

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

When Jesus enters the synagogue and teaches, He teaches with authority. That doesn't mean an extra tone to His voice that makes Him sound extra-convincing. It's far more concrete: normally, when a rabbi taught in the synagogue, he would begin by establishing the teaching's pedigree along the lines of, "I got this teaching from Rabbi Fred, who got it from Rabbi Hank, who got it from ..." and so on back even to Moses. Jesus doesn't do that when He teaches: we have a great example of this while He's preaching the Sermon on the Mount, where He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' *But I say* to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22).

See the difference? Jesus doesn't rely on the precedent of elders and authorities when He teaches. He claims that authority for Himself – and more! He doesn't just say He has a great understanding of what has been said before: He adds to it! He proclaims new doctrine on His own authority – as if He is God Himself!

This leaves open one of two possibilities: either Jesus is God Himself in the flesh, or else He's a heretic who claims to be God so that He can add to God's Word. I find it interesting that His hearers are amazed, not automatically offended. But "amazed" is not the same as "convinced," and so a question lingers: Jesus teaches as one with authority, but how can they be sure that He's not just a heretic running a con? How can they be sure He's not just all talk? How can they know that He really has the authority He asserts?

It is here that the devil (!) helps prove Jesus' divinity; for while the devil is far smarter than us, he is still a stooge before the Lord. In this case, it is a man with an unclean spirit who is present in the synagogue that day. Note that word "unclean:" for reasons unknown to us, an evil spirit dwells in this man and renders him unholy before God, enslaved to sin and the devil. The smartest thing that an unclean spirit could do at this point is just be quiet and make it look like Jesus is all talk and no power; but in a fit of unrighteous indignation, the unclean spirit says to Jesus, "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."

What a great testimony about Jesus! The unclean spirit affirms that Jesus is fully human, born and raised in Nazareth. The unclean spirit declares that Jesus is fully divine, the Holy One of God. And to top it off, the unclean spirit asks Jesus about His work, namely, "Have you come to destroy us?"

Thus the unclean spirit throws a hanging curve ball; and Jesus wields a big bat.

"Have you come to destroy us?" asks the man with the unclean spirit. Frankly, this is the easiest solution: if you have a man with an unclean spirit, the easiest way to get rid of the problem is to destroy them both; and if Jesus wants to put on a show of authority, do you think anyone is going to mess with Him if He reduces the man to smoldering dust on the floor of the synagogue?

But Jesus hasn't become flesh to destroy the man with the unclean spirit. He's come not to destroy, but to deliver him. Jesus commands the spirit, "Be silent and come out of him!" The unclean spirit has no choice but to obey: he gives the man one last convulsion on the way out, like the busted bully who kicks at his victim one last time as he's hauled to the principal's office; then he calls out with a loud cry and departs.

Please note: unclean spirits, demons and the like are real and, compared to mankind, quite powerful and scary. In Matthew 8:28, we have the record of an entire town that has seriously modified its normal operations because of two possessed men; in Acts 19:16, one man with an evil spirit attacks seven men and wins. Confronted by such a man in the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus essentially says, "Oh, go away" as if he's talking to a stray dog staring at His French Fries; and the unclean spirit slinks away with a howl.

So, question answered. Does Jesus have the authority to teach the way He does? Yes. Yes, He does.

And what does He use His authority to do? To deliver. He doesn't use it to vanquish the man who has brought an unclean spirit into the synagogue, and who no doubt has been doing unclean things himself given his demonic enslavement. Instead, Jesus casts out the spirit and delivers the man. He gets rid of the unclean; and in doing so, He makes the man clean. This man is set free to be a holy child of God.

Jesus has become man to save man from sin, death and devil; and with His first miracle in Mark, He demonstrates this very thing. However, note that He uses His power and authority in the form of mercy and service. Here, He delivers a man from an unclean spirit. On Calvary, He will deliver the world from sin by suffering for the sins of all. Give this some time in your meditations this week: how does Jesus suffer and die on the cross? It looks like He suffers helplessly, powerlessly. However, the truth is that He suffers and dies *with authority*: so great is His sacrifice on the cross that by it He is able to make all who believe in Him clean, pure and holy.

This probably explains, by the way, why Jesus tells the unclean spirit to be quiet, even though it is making such a forthright confession of who Jesus is. The fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the Holy One of God who has come to destroy evil is all perfectly true – but it's not the whole truth. At this stage, people might easily get the wrong idea that He's going to defeat sin, death and devil by some mighty acts of power – not by His own sacrifice. If everybody thinks that Jesus is going to win the victory by mighty acts of power, they'll likely do everything they can to prevent anything bad from happening to Him. They'll likely do whatever they can to keep Him from dying for their sins! Until that part of the plan is out in the open, Jesus keeps urging silence about His miracles. It's worth noting that, once He starts teaching that He's going to be crucified, He stops telling people to be quiet about His wonders.

It is a wonderful thing, after all: Jesus teaches with authority. He commands evil spirits, and they obey him. He speaks, and He makes people clean.

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This little bit of Mark gives us much to ponder with joy today. Let's look at three things.

First, we can't read through this text and not rejoice in God's gift of absolution. Among His people, the forgiveness of sins is spoken with authority, with confidence in Christ Jesus, crucified and risen. You heard it to be so at the start of the service. You note that, as the pastor here, I did not say to you, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of Tim," because I have no authority in myself to take sins away. Nor did I say, "I have it on pretty good authority from David, who got it from Leonard, who got it from Harold, who got it from John, who got it from Mervin, that God tends to be a pretty forgiving sort of

fellow." No, forgiveness is spoken on the authority of Jesus, crucified and risen, who declares that all authority has been given to Him, and who then has given His Church authority to speak His forgiving Word. Thus, if you want to simplify the absolution you heard this morning, I essentially said this, "As the pastor here, I'm here to say what Jesus would say if He were standing here instead of me. And Jesus says, 'I, Jesus, forgive you all of your sins.'" That Word of Jesus is just as authoritative, powerful and effective here and now as when Jesus told the unclean spirit to depart in our text.

So how do you know that God doesn't hold your sins against you? Jesus Himself has told *you*. You have it on good authority!

Second, a more sobering note from this text is this: at the synagogue where Jesus taught that day, there was a man with an unclean spirit. It doesn't sound like he was hanging out at the bar down the street and barged in, either, but that he was a regular. Apparently, nobody knew about the unclean spirit until Jesus arrived.

We must take seriously the truth of Ephesians 6:12, that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Like it or not, you are engaged in spiritual warfare. For the past couple of centuries, the devil has been rather coy in our part of the world, giving the impression that he doesn't exist. It's a rather smart move on his part: if the devil doesn't exist, he is not to be feared. And if the devil doesn't exist, the world is quick to decide that evil doesn't really exist, either; and if there is no such thing as evil, then there really isn't such a thing as sin. *Voila*: our current society, trusting in sciences, feelings and the goodness of man, all the while rejecting God's Word.

This time of the hiding devil, however, seems to be waning: I have colleagues who have encountered overt demon possession and similar odd happenings in our own nation, much as missionaries have seen them in foreign lands for years.

Overt or not, you are always on the front line of spiritual warfare, because the battle is always fought in your conscience. A good conscience believes that God doesn't hold your sins against you because you're forgiven for Jesus' sake. A bad conscience either doubts God's grace or just defies His Word. If the devil can tempt you to entertain some unrepented sin or doubt that God forgives you, he can still pick you off even though he's already defeated.

This is why the Church must always be about the means of grace, about our Lord's Word and sacraments. That is where Jesus is to be found, and found forgiving sins! You and I are no match for the evil one, but Christ sends him packing with His Word. If we cease to speak of repentance and forgiveness, if our worship is no longer centered on the means of grace, we have laid down our weapons and we invite defeat.

Beyond our gathering here, I would urge you to consider that spiritual warfare is an ongoing battle in all areas of life. We simply do not know all of the devil's tricks. We do know that the devil has no scruples and will go after the battered, the weak and the vulnerable. So, for instance:

Rather than simply view illness and injury as a medical condition of the body, we are far wiser to ask the Lord both for physical healing and protection from all evil.

Rather than dismiss a child's nightmare as merely a bad dream, we should bless that child with Scripture and pray for God's intervention.

Rather than believe that those who battle mental illness should be left only to behavioral health experts, we should pray for them earnestly, knowing that the devil will be at work in their minds.

Rather than simply see addictions as a bad habit and behavioral problem, we should also regard them as the satanic attack that they are.

Let me be clear: God provides medical doctors, psychologists, behavioral therapists and the like as His instruments. I am not saying that you should avoid such help and rely solely on prayer; and I condemn the idea that to seek medical attention signals a lack of faith. My point is this: where the body and mind are under attack, you can bet that the soul is too. To believe that physical illness, mental illness, or even childish nightmares are not also accompanied by evil assaults is to be terribly naïve. It's better than saying the devil doesn't exist at all, but it's still underestimating his insidiousness.

If, by the way, you take spiritual warfare seriously, and you figure that you can just navigate your way through life and avoid defeat by being a generally good person, you've already lost.

Third, here's the good news of the text: Jesus does not come to destroy you. He has come and defeated the devil, and evil is no match for Him. It's not even close: there's no drama when He says to this unclean spirit, "Be silent and come out of him!" In Greek, there's not even an exclamation mark. As I've said before, this isn't like a superhero fighting an arch-villain for 45 minutes before he finally summons up a little extra strength to win: it's no contest with Jesus. He wins.

He wins and He gives that victory to you, in His means of grace. Remember: He's already given you eternal life and welcomed you into His kingdom in Holy Baptism. He continues to give you protection and help when He absolves you by His Word of forgiveness. He gives you all help needed in the Supper, His own body and blood that defeated death and opened the grave forever.

That's why going to church once a week, at least, makes sense, because the devil doesn't take a day off and the attacks are neverending. That's why sanctifying each day by Word and prayer in your daily devotions is a no-brainer. That's why, the more seriously you take this battle, the more you want the Supper. The victory is yours, because Christ who won the victory gives it to you, sustains you in it; and you know exactly where. It is why His means of grace are such treasures.

Rejoice! Christ is present in His Word and sacraments, and He is present with authority.

Where you have sinned, He forgives you.

Where you have made yourself unclean, He cleanses you.

Where others have defiled you, He purifies you.

Where you are weak, He is strong and He is your strength.

Where Christ is, the devil must flee: and Christ is with you in His means of grace. The battle has been won at the cross and the empty tomb, and the victory is given to you by faith in His Word and sacraments.

He has died, He is risen, and He is given all authority. And by that authority, He delivers you from all evil as He says to you, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen