

Text: Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²²The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

²⁵“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” ²⁶The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” ²⁸News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The Authority of Jesus in Word and Deed

In last week's passage, we heard how Mark introduces Jesus as a *preacher*, declaring the message, "the kingdom of God was at hand." He then calls four fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James and, John, to come and follow him. Mark will take us on a journey *with* these first disciples to witness all that Jesus the Messiah does in his ministry. We are invited to follow them on this adventure and to discover who exactly it is that they are following. Mark then presents us with a series of short stories that serve to demonstrate what the Kingdom of God actually looks like. Separately, and together, they offer a beautiful invitation to the "good news" – the gospel.

They first come to Capernaum, a small village by the Sea of Galilee - which is actually a large freshwater lake. We are told that on the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. Now a synagogue is a public place of prayer and instruction for a Jewish community. As long as there were 10 households in a locality they were required by law to establish a synagogue. This was not a place of singing or sacrifice - sacrifices could only be undertaken in the Temple in Jerusalem. So people prayed, read the Old Testament Scriptures available to them, and then someone would expound on their meaning. In this case, that someone is Jesus, who Mark now presents as a *teacher*. Mark tells us that the people "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." 'Scribes' were far more than mere copyists or secretaries. They were honored for the function of reading and interpreting the Scriptures; so they were the authorized Hebrew scholars of their day. These erudite religious leaders would often say things like "Moses said this" or "Rabbi so-and-so said that," but Mark tells us that Jesus spoke with a compelling authority *all of his own*. Jesus interprets Scripture as one has the *right* to say what it means. And with that same authority, he spoke *powerful* words of healing. The Kingdom of God is not just about words, it is also a *reality* brought about by *action*. The subject of today's passage, then, is about Jesus' authority in *word* and *deed*.

Incidentally, as we continue through Mark, teaching in the synagogue will bring Jesus into conflict with the scribes. Mark consistently presents the Jewish religious leaders as opponents of Jesus, rather than Satan or the dark forces of evil. That's our cue to turn to that happens next.

When Jesus goes to the synagogue, he finds something unexpected for a place of worship, namely, an *impure* man. In Scripture "impure" simply means contrary to the sacred, or "unclean." The man is possessed by an unclean spirit, or a demon. Let's listen to Mark again:

"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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him."

More than any other gospel, Mark emphasizes the miracles, healings, and exorcisms of Jesus. About one third of Mark's gospel recounts miracles, along with four exorcisms. What are to make of this first

incident?

Many struggle to take a passage like this seriously, today. You might want to associate it with a Hollywood horror movie, but not with real life. As someone who has lived in Africa, I am aware of the fear associated with a witchdoctor within a local community. In many ways, it does not matter whether or not we can assign a scientific explanation for the powers that witchdoctors seem to possess, because the community itself *believes those powers are real*. So when a witchdoctor puts a curse on someone, people have been known to be so in bondage to, or dominated by, this worldview that they lose the will to live, and die. Tragically, this only reinforces the perceived powers of the witchdoctor! There is more to evil than we first think, and I want to explore this briefly before moving on.

There are those who argue that evil is simply the *absence* of the good. Let me explain with an example: there is no such thing as a “bad apple” *in itself*, just varieties of good apples that have lost some of their goodness. What this means, then, is that evil is not something real that exists in itself, rather evil is real in the sense that it is *experienced* – and I hope we can all agree that evil *is* experienced. This isn’t a modern idea; it goes way back to St. Augustine and beyond. But it gives the impression that evil is *passive*, and I think evil is more *active* than that.

Let me relate what I mean with a more contemporary example. Many of you work – or have worked - within schools, companies, and social institutions of various kinds. That work environment has a life and an ethos of its own, perhaps made more apparent in the staff room, or the cafeteria, as well as in the board room. When you go somewhere for an interview, you are also trying to assess the “feel of the place.” Is there a collective sense of optimism, hope, and cheerfulness, or is it a gloomy, well-poisoned environment? These impersonal, non-physical realities are at the center of every institutional life and are a real *spiritual* force to be reckoned with. If you are someone in a leadership position, you will know how difficult it is to change the culture of an institution – big or small. Even if you can replace some of the personnel, negative memories can still hold the workplace in bondage. As theologian Walter Wink puts it: “The corporate identity is not simply the sum total of all it is, but also bears the message of what it *ought* to be.¹ And that sense of “ought to be” can become tainted or corrupted. Instead of being life-giving to all its employees and clients, it can become a negative message of bondage and “domination.” A purely materialistic explanation will miss out on this subtle reality.

I even think there are situations where you can imagine that evil is not only more than the sum of its parts, but *has a life of its own*. We can see this in the collective behavior of human beings, such as in rioting and looting, and gang violence, especially towards defenseless people. Some of these actions are truly abhorrent, horrendous, and inhuman – as we know from the Holocaust. But in addition to

¹ Wink, *Powers That Be*, 30.

larger, systemic evils (like racism, sexism, and consumerism) and other evils (like genocide) that are fueled by ideologies, *individuals* can be in bondage to very real powers, like alcohol, drugs, pornography, phobias, and blind ambition. Addiction to such behaviors creates vicious cycles from which we cannot escape. In other words, we are trapped a system of bondage from which we need deliverance. We need rescuing from ourselves.

I think this perspective on evil allows us to better relate with today's story. In the ancient near East, evil spirits were widely regarded as the principal cause of physical and psychological sicknesses, and even of natural disasters. Certain people functioned as exorcists by invoking divine power against malignant forces, often through various magical incantations and demonstrations. On one level, it does *not* matter whether or not *you or I* believe in demons; the point is that the people in New Testament times did! To ask, "Is a demon-possessed person really referring to mental illness?", or, "Do the convulsions mean he really had epilepsy?" are to ask wrong questions. The appropriate question is not, "What *really* happened?" But what did this happening really *mean*? Regardless of the precise medical or spiritual condition of the person, *the key point of the story is that Jesus has authority even over demonic powers*. One feature of the arrival of the kingdom of God is that Jesus' powerful word liberates from the oppressive power of evil. Let's listen again to Jesus' encounter with the man:

"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.*"²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "*Be silent, and come out of him!*"

The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as "the holy one of God." The demon is more perceptive than the human audience, in terms of Jesus' true identity! And it alerts Mark's *readers* that the power by which Jesus teaches and exorcizes is a function of his unique relationship with God. Yet this audience doesn't seem to understand. Moreover, the demon says, "*Have you come to destroy us?*" The demon knows that the Messiah's coming marks the end of their dominion over human beings, in other words, the present evil age is coming to an end. Jesus says to the demon, "Be silent"; this command means, "Be muzzled." In Mark's narrative, now is *not* the time for the secret epiphany at Christ's baptism to be made public! This exorcism, then, is the first direct evidence of the Holy Spirit is working *through* Jesus, since Jesus does not call for divine assistance. Since the unclean spirit is the antithesis of the Holy Spirit, Satan appears to be no match for Jesus in Mark's Gospel.² Mark then writes:

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "*What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.*"²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

² Indeed, Jesus' main opponents in Mark's gospel are human beings. In particular, the scribes from Jerusalem who accuse him of using demonic power (see 3:22 – 27)!

This “new teaching” is perhaps better understood as “unprecedented” or “previously unknown.” Moreover, it is not just *information*, it is *transformation*. Jesus’ actions are seen as a *sign* that a new religious leader has appeared, in contrast to apparent lack of power of the synagogue scribes. This is how Jesus became so popular so quickly. Yet within the public career of Jesus, these “mighty works” were not simply showy magic, nor the attempt to win support from the crowds.³ They were signs and proclamations – deeds and words - that that the kingdom of God was present. And that kingdom cannot be separated from the person of Jesus who embodies God’s power.

As mentioned earlier, one purpose of Mark’s gospel is to allow us to participate with Jesus’ first disciples in the gradual recognition of *who* it is that they are following, until *we* reached the conclusion to which the demoniac already points: “the holy one of God.” This incident, and others like it, is a challenge for all of us today, but, perhaps, especially for ministers. We will continue to explore this over the coming weeks. At this point, let me simply say this:

First, we are *not* going to get anywhere if we don’t recognize and name evil for what it is. If we fail to do that, we become “complicit.” While a precise definition of evil’s dark, destructive forces may be difficult to articulate, we know from experience, and from a Christian perspective, that evil “seems bent on attacking and destroying creation in general, and humankind in particular, and above all on thwarting God’s project of remaking the world and human beings in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.”⁴ As followers of Jesus - as participants in the Kingdom of God - we are *all called* to *actively* oppose that which we know to be evil.

Second, we can only do this through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke and acted with *divine* authority. Although I am baptized with the Spirit, as we *all* are in our Trinitarian baptism, I am *not* Jesus the Messiah; none of us are - obviously! But hear how Mark ends his gospel, after the resurrected Jesus commissions his disciples, we read: “They went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (Mark 16:20). Jesus passes on that divine authority to us. Effective preaching and any miracles that occur are not only signs that the kingdom of God is near, but can only occur because the Holy Spirit is present. The Holy Spirit is likened to the wind in the Bible; we cannot control the Spirit’s power and produce “miracles on demand,” but we are invited in every time and place to expect the unexpected. It is not about me, or about you, but about God’s Spirit working *through* us. What we pray for – and work diligently for - is to witness glimpses of that holy presence of God. Not so that we can hoard such experiences for ourselves, but so that we can *share* them with others who need rescuing too. Amen.

³ And certainly not in themselves indication or hints that Jesus was in fact divine, i.e., a member of the Trinity – this latter connection came later in Church history.

⁴ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 107–9, 111–2.