

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2018

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Astounded by Authority

Mark 1:21-28

INTRODUCTION

Mark's story of Jesus Christ doesn't start with his birth; Jesus is an adult who is attracted to John the Baptizer's preaching and ministry. One of Mark's key words is "immediately;" events transpire suddenly and quickly. There's an urgency to the Savior's work. So after John baptizes Jesus, the Spirit compels him into the wilderness where he wins the battle of temptation. When he comes back into society, he hears that John has been arrested, and Jesus adopts John's message: "Repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand." Right away, Jesus goes to Capernaum, a fishing village in Galilee, and he calls to the fishermen. Without any hesitation, they follow him as his disciples.

Another theme for Mark is that it takes a while for the people who meet Jesus, including his disciples, to comprehend his identity and purpose. As we come to this morning's reading, Jesus attends worship at the synagogue of Capernaum and teaches as a lay rabbi. Suddenly, one in the audience interrupted him. Today we might think of this one as struggling with mental illness, but in the first century, they diagnosed his problem as possession by "an unclean spirit." When Jesus releases him from its clutches, the citizens were astounded and try to figure out who this is.

THE READING

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and 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, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They 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.' 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SERMON

At Christmas a church member gave me an amaryllis plant, along with a picture of what it would look like once it flowered. She assured me that it *would* bloom and encouraged patience. Well, in a few weeks, out of the first two stalks came not only one hot-pink blossom, but six! Six gorgeous flowers! Then, once these died, a baby-stalk shot up and burst forth into three more flowers that we're enjoying right now. I have been astounded at each stage, because I've never seen anything quite like this until now!

Let us pray together: Spirit of Life, tend the seeds you have planted today and help us, your people, grow in your Word, Amen!

The people in Capernaum that day were astounded. They'd never seen anything quite like Jesus. His teaching and healing were new and different – beautiful surprises that touched their longing to grow in God. At first they couldn't find the right word for what was so astonishing about him, and then it came: "authority." "He taught them as one *with authority*." The gospel writer Mark highlights the authority of Christ through all the events in chapter one: the voice from heaven at his baptism, his victory over Satan's temptations, the fishermen dropping their nets, and now the role and power he exercised in Capernaum.¹

Of course, the congregants were accustomed to leaders with titles and degrees, people who held religious office, including the well-meaning scribes, **who would tell them what scripture said and what Jewish tradition valued.** *Christian* leaders can be this way too, dictating doctrine to kids and adults. This scribal style of teaching has its place, but the risk is that the listener may only hear: "Blah, blah, blah."

It was *not* this usual top-down, boring type of faith education that astounded the group that day! Instead, Jesus likely engaged them in dynamic dialogue as they investigated the scripture – what it meant originally and then what it signified in the present, so that the result was a totally *living* word from God, a relevant, creative message for them, their town, and the world! **The authority that amazed them was that they felt connected to God's Word.**

As a result of Vatican II, small lay groups developed around Roman Catholic parishes that studied the bible and took collective action to better the lives of the poor. In South and Central America, they were called base ecclesial communities (BECs). These were especially successful in the 1970s and 80s, even in the wake of terrible repression by those in positions of political power.

Ironically, the BECs remind us as *Protestant* churches, especially in our *congregational* organization, about the importance of bible study, lay learning, and authority, because to be "congregational" includes seeking to connect to God's living Word together. Doing this today would astound others too!

There is a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy commands little brother, Linus, to do something for her. In mild rebellion, he asks for one good reason. She lifts her hand: "I'll give you five." (Act out the fist.) And shaking, Linus says, "Those are good reasons!"

¹The Greek word, translated in the NRSV as "authority," is "exousia." The word refers to "the right given by God, but with it, the inner power to accomplish mighty deeds." Sherman E. Johnson, *A Commentary on The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1972), 47.

Those in the Capernaum congregation were used to a second type of leadership: people who led with their fists. "It's my way or the highway!" The Roman military occupied their region, a puppet monarch 'ruled' the Jews, and religious authorities, under a veneer of spirituality, exercised power *over* others. **All of these so-called authorities were interested in accomplishing *their* will.**

I imagine the people of Jesus' day like Gulliver, washed up on shore and bound by a zillion Lilliputian ropes: laws, class, gender, and racial rules, constraints of poverty, plus the pressure to conform. Bound. The secular and religious culture colluded to keep them in line, and it gave them no way out. The folks in the pews there would have had stories to add to the "Me Too" movement! Defeatism could have been a captive too: "Things won't change. It's just the way it is. You don't deserve better."

So the man who walked into the service that day was suffering. In today's language, he was "the identified patient" within a sick *system* of oppression, and his acting-out was a symptom of the toxic water in which *all* of them were swimming!

Hilltown Church, one of the three I researched for my PhD dissertation, had a vision of being "The Welcoming People of God," and a worshipper in their midst one Sunday tested their identity. Off his meds, he suffered a psychotic break, disrupted the service, threatened others, and had to be restrained before they got him in the ambulance. Though the laity and clergy were rattled, they handled it well. When the local news interviewed the minister, she replied: "I'm glad that Danny came here today. It could've been worse elsewhere, because *here* he was met with love."

So when Jesus met the man in love and confronted the unclean spirit with tough love, the man was released from his negative neurons. He regained his equilibrium and reintegrated into his faith family. **Healed, he could once more act on *God's* will.** The whole synagogue felt his shackles fall and was empowered with him!

A friend of mine was devastated when her husband was diagnosed with cancer; her whole world collapsed. As she cared for him, though, she began to notice that this terrible experience had brought her to the edge of her mortality, strangely *freeing* her from the fear of death. How could anything worse come her way?! She expressed, "I have been dangerously liberated," meaning that from that point she was able to act on her faith with boldness.

I think this sort of liberation is behind what TriCon is reaching for in *its* Vision Statement: "to be a nurturing community of faith that honors God through service and mission." Like the amaryllis, you want your spirituality to blossom into bold action!

If we have authority, we don't force others to do *our* will, nor teach in order merely to maintain the status quo. The authority of Christ liberates us to do what *God* wants, by connecting us first of all to God's living word. We should be ready to be astounded!