

“As One with Authority” – Mark 1:21-28 – January 31, 2021

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

In our lesson from Mark’s gospel, we learn that the first act of Jesus’ public ministry is to teach in the synagogue in the town of Capernaum. The people who hear him are astounded. Why? Because Jesus doesn’t teach like the scribes. He teaches as one having authority.

The scribes were scholars. They spent their time studying the law, the Torah, and interpreting that law for others. The insights they received were based on their detailed study of scripture and learning what previous scholars had understood. Based upon their studies, they would draw conclusions and then present the information to the people. But Jesus was different. He spoke on behalf of God. He spoke like a prophet.

Now, the time of the prophets in Israel’s history seemed long over. If you heard the sermon from last week, we looked at Jonah. He may have been bad at his job, but he was still a prophet. The job of a prophet was to take a message from God and deliver it to a group of people. It was generally a message of God’s displeasure paired with a call to repent or else. The prophet called people to turn from their evil ways and come back into relationship with God, by following God’s commandments.

In the story about Jesus coming, John the Baptist had the role of a prophet, alerting the people of Israel that God was about to do something big, and they needed to repent to get ready. And then Jesus arrived. And now as an adult, it was time for him to begin his work. And he starts by teaching in the synagogue. When he begins, they are astonished by him.

And this evident by not only his manner of teaching but by what comes next in the story. While Jesus is teaching, a man with an unclean spirit enters the synagogue. Immediately, the unclean or evil spirit recognized who Jesus was, and cried out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus! Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you’re the Holy One of God!”

In the ancient world, evil spirits were believed to be the cause of numerous physical and mental maladies. To be under the control of an unclean spirit was tragic because it caused one to be ostracized from the rest of society. No one wanted to be around a person categorized as unclean or having an unclean spirit for fear that the “uncleanness” would rub off.

Seemingly without effort, Jesus simply commanded the unclean spirit to shut up and get out of the man. With one parting seizure and a cry of defeat, the spirit left. Indeed the unclean spirit was correct about Jesus, because in fact, Jesus did come into the world to overthrow all those powers that would cause a person to be considered unclean and marginalized from the rest of society.

And this action by Jesus there in the synagogue cemented the assertion his hearers already made. This Jesus taught with authority. Not only did his teachings sound different than that of the scribes but his teachings exhibited power. He had the power to command others. Even the unclean spirits that existed merely to torment and keep people down were no match to this new teaching.

In our 21st century mindset, we may scoff at the idea of being possessed or controlled by an unclean spirit. This story seems to have little to do with our very rational lives here in Central Wisconsin. We don't hear of too many exorcisms happening around town. But let's think about this for a minute. There are indeed unclean powers that can assert control over us. We **do** allow things of this world to have authority over our lives.

Think about people who struggle with various kinds of addictions. Sometimes there are things that take hold of us and that threaten to control people just like you and me. Greed, pride, gambling, prejudice, pornography, materialism, revenge, any number of addictions, rage, feelings of entitlement. And many times, those powers that control us hurt not only us, but effect the people around us.

I think each one of us here, if we give it some thought, can name at least one negative thing that has authority in our lives. And often these things have such a hold over us, we find it hard to rid ourselves of them. Sometimes the power of its authority over us is so strong, we may not want to give it up. But even when we do get the point of desiring to be free of the bondage of this unclean spirit, we often cannot rid ourselves of it on our own.

The good news is that Christ has come to defeat the powers that overwhelm us. He comes bringing liberation, to free us from the evil that binds us and controls us. His authority is indeed unique, because he comes with the authority of God. And he comes bringing to us the possibility of life altering change. His authority is always trustworthy. God wants all people to experience total healing and wholeness in their lives. God brings to us an authority that supersedes any other power that might assert control in our lives. God brings to us the power of transformation, of becoming something more than we could ever imagine for ourselves. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves who or what holds the authority in our lives? Is there something that has gotten beyond our control and has too much power in our lives?

Let us all look to God for healing in those places in our lives that have taken a negative toll on who we are. Let us pursue the healing and wholeness that God offers to each one us. May it be so.