

Sermon on Mark 1:21-28  
Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, January 28, 2018  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear Friends in Christ, grace and peace to you....

We left off last week in Mark's gospel with Jesus calling his disciples, who were fishermen casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee, and *immediately they left their nets and followed him*. Because Jesus' call was urgent: "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!*" Just like the people of Ninevah had once heard the prophet Jonah's call to repent, fishermen named Simon, Andrew, James and John *immediately* dropped everything to go with Jesus. Where was he taking them?

The first place they came to was Capernaum, a town by the Sea, where Jesus entered the synagogue to teach. Mark says, *They were astounded at this teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*. It's not clear whether the word "they" referred only to the disciples following Jesus or everyone in the synagogue that day, but it is clear that Jesus' *authority* is what astounded those who heard Jesus teach. If the word *immediately* was the focus of the sermon last Sunday, the word *authority* is the focus today.

Minnesota native Stephen Hultgren, who teaches New Testament at Australian Lutheran College, explained the meaning of the Greek word for "authority" here: *exousia*, which has a root meaning "it is free" or "it is permitted" – so *exousia* means the "sovereign freedom" of one who acts without hindrance. (Maybe like a "free press".) Jesus taught from God's Word - the Torah - in that synagogue with sovereign freedom, without hindrance, very unlike the scribes, whose authority came from their knowledge and adherence to tradition. (This is basically true of biblical scholars even today, I should add!) Jesus was unique, as he taught with independent authority – rather, the authority which comes from God. Jesus' teaching was "new" and bold – unlike the "same old stuff" which the scribes taught. (Or what we pastors might teach and preach today!)

Jesus backed up his authority to teach with his authority over unclean spirits. Right there in the synagogue, Mark says, "*just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.'*" But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "*Be silent and come out of him!*" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, asking one another, "*What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.*" At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

This authority, freedom and boldness by which Jesus taught, and cast out demons, which astounded and attracted those who heard him, also became a danger for him. His adversaries (the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the Law) were of course offended by his freedom, just as much as they were astounded, and some accused him of *blasphemy* – of heresy against God. They were threatened by his power over unclean spirits, which were a sign of his identity and authority as the Son of God. So the same freedom and authority Jesus had in his teaching was also dangerous – eventually it got him crucified.

Oddly, Jesus didn't have power that the world would recognize. I guess the power over wind and waves would be impressive, but mostly his power was to proclaim the good news of God's mercy, interpret God's Word, and heal the sick. He didn't have the power of financial wealth or armies at his command. He wasn't a priest with the power of the Temple behind him. He would not show up in history books, except for a short reference by the Jewish historian Josephus, if it hadn't been for the spread of his teachings by his followers and the growth in power of the Christian Church. The only authority Jesus really had was the "sovereign freedom" he had to do God's will, to teach God's truth - the power of his words and his deeds, living his life as God's servant. And Jesus used his authority not to obtain power for himself, but to serve humanity. In Mark 10 we hear him say, *"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you...For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

So what is this teaching, which still holds authority for us today? Who is this who calls you and me to follow, who teaches the words of truth that give us life, who has power and authority over evil, and gives us life in the face of death?

And perhaps more important, what is our response to the words of Jesus today? Are we still amazed at his authority and by his teachings, as if we were still hearing them afresh, or have they become too familiar to challenge us? Do we respond with fear, asking Jesus "what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth," like the unclean spirit in the story? Do Jesus' words challenge us too strongly, when we'd rather be left alone to our own devices? Or are we still amazed and inspired by Jesus' words of healing, hope, and power over evil, sin and death? This takes a bit more thought than a mere "immediate response" to follow Jesus, like the one we may have had long ago in Sunday School, or in a worship service. This is about following the lead of our Lord Jesus, a real person who challenged the rules, traditions and assumptions of religious people in his time, whenever they made human beings outcasts, condemned other people, or failed to show mercy. It's about following the one who challenged evil from the beginning, and wasn't afraid to speak truth to power, even at the risk of his own life.

It requires a more expansive view of the demonic forces in our world – we're not talking about *ouji* boards here, or horror movies like *The Exorcist*. It means we need to be honest and call evil deeds for what they are. Where is the hatred against immigrants and refugees coming from, and the callous disregard for decency and humanity, when fathers and mothers are separated from their children and deported after a lifetime of being our neighbors, and the lack of compassion when refugees are left to die neglected in camps? Where does the evil come from which keeps us divided from one another in our own country, the greed that keeps too many poor while others become rich, and the lack of compassion which imprisons some unjustly while others freely manipulate the system? There are demons to confront in ourselves, as well as around us in our world – which originate in our sins of greed, lust for power, fear and hate of those whom we don't understand. I recall a beautiful poem by Steve Garnas-Holmes, which ends in a prayer of trust in the power of God in Christ, called *Cast Away My Demons*.

*Yes, he has come to destroy them.  
Demonic forces that wreck people;  
Do not doubt that he has come to cast them out, all of them,  
Not merely to touch individuals but to disarm evil itself,  
To reclaim the cosmos.  
Demonic spirits of injustice that dehumanize,  
That possess people,  
That bind us and blind us with hate and diminishment of others,  
With hard heartedness and violence,  
Demons of fear and self-protection –  
He has come to do away with them.  
He is not afraid of loud voices, the convulsions they will incite.  
He has called all his beloved to share in the baptism of his power.  
He comes with authority.  
For his love has the power, yes, to overcome evil.*

*O Mighty One, Loving One,  
O Capable Hand, O Willing Heart,  
Cast out my demons,  
My fear and inadequacy,  
And fill me with your Spirit instead,  
The power to resist evil,  
To set free from the grip of the demonic  
What is human, what is fragile and beautiful,  
What is yours. Amen.*