

Epiphany 4, January 28, 2024

**MARK 1:21–28.** (EHV)

Then [Jesus and his disciples] went into Capernaum. On the next Sabbath day, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them as one who has authority and not as the experts in the law. Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue. It cried out, “What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Jesus rebuked the spirit, saying, **“Be quiet! Come out of him!”** The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and after crying out with a loud voice, it came out of him. Everyone was so amazed that they began to discuss this with each other. They said, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!” News about him spread quickly through all the region of Galilee.

Almost every religion on earth has started with someone teaching. And the ones that haven't are pretty hollow religions.

About 2,500 years ago Prince Siddhartha of India quit his royal life at the age of twenty-nine after he saw the reality of suffering and dissatisfaction in the world. He went out and sat beneath the *Bodhi* tree until he supposedly received enlightenment at age thirty-five. From then on he was known as Shakyamuni Buddha, and for the remaining forty-five years of his life he wandered across northern India teaching anyone who was interested about freedom from suffering through enlightenment. Today we call these teachings Buddhism.

About 1,400 years ago Mohammad received a proposal of marriage from Khadijah. Khadijah was a shrewd woman who had inherited her father's vast wealth and successfully managed and preserved it. This wealth gave Mohammad freedom to meditate for weeks at a time. It was during one of these meditation trips that the angel Gabriel supposedly gave him the first of many revelations. After gaining a few converts, including his wife, Mohammad began publicly teaching and preaching, and though his teaching initially met with opposition, with some help from the sword, his religion survived and is now known as Islam.

Jesus taught too. But as Mark makes clear for us this morning, his teaching was different. Not only was his teaching delivered with authority, but he also backed up that authority. As we consider Jesus's early ministry today, let's see why Jesus's teaching caused amazement among the people, so that we, too, are amazed at his teaching.

**1.**

Jesus had just called his first apostles in training—Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. Zebedee, the father of James and John, may have still been standing there in the boat with his mouth open, wondering what had just happened when all five of them entered the lakeside village of Capernaum, where Simon and Andrew now lived.

When Saturday came, Jesus went into the synagogue and taught. And for as long as he was teaching, the people were amazed at his teaching.

Why? We're told “because he was teaching them as one who has authority, not as the experts in the law.” Part of this had to do with the *method* of Jesus's teaching. In order to understand how the experts in the law taught, perhaps some excerpts from the Talmud and

Midrash might help. Here's one: "Rabbi Judan has said, 'This is what Rabbi Johanan son of Zakkai and Rabbi Aquiba have said...'" And another: "Rabbi Johanan has said in the name of Rabbi Simeon son of Jochai..." And countless other instances of "Rabbi So-and-so said this in the name of Rabbi Such-and-such."

But how did Jesus teach? "Amen *I* tell you." Or he simply told it as it was without any preface at all. Even when the experts in the law quoted Scripture, they did so only looking at the surface of the words while ignoring their context and true meaning. But what did Jesus do when he quoted the Scriptures and the traditions in the Sermon on the Mount? "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder'... You have heard that it was said, Do not commit adultery.'... You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" And what always followed? "But *I* tell you." "*I* tell you that murder is not just slaying someone." "*I* tell you that adultery is not just sleeping with someone." "*I* tell you that you should love even your enemies."

But it wasn't just Jesus's method. It was also the *content* of his message. Jesus didn't establish his authority just by saying over and over again, "It's true, I tell you!" The message itself established his authority.

When he taught them the law, when he taught them what real adultery was, what real murder was, what real hatred was, their consciences had to admit, "Yes, this is true. God holds me accountable for my inner life too."

When he taught them the gospel, when he taught them that the solution was not to focus more or try harder, but to repent and believe that they were forgiven, even the skeptics were forced to admit to themselves, "If I accept everything this man says about the law, then what he says about the free mercy of God is the only real solution."

Friends, if you ever hear, or are tempted to think yourself, that all religions are just different paths to the same God, then it's time to take a fresh look at Jesus's teaching. It's time for us to open up our ears and hear what he is actually saying to us. Because if we do, we will realize it's the only teaching that penetrates to the deepest recesses of our heart, exposing every dark corner and completely cleansing the whole mess.

Jesus doesn't pull any punches with us. He levels with us about our condition. He tells us that we are not all basically good. We are all basically bad, conceived and born corrupt and self-centered inside and out. If we don't listen to him, we will all start playing the comparison game, which only leads to our own arguments and opinions about which sin is worse and which sin God is really serious about. And in the end we will not have certainty, but at best we will only be able to hope for the best. Which will be followed by hell.

But if we listen to him and let his teaching overtake us and convince us of our wretchedness, we will find that all along we were running away from his teaching for nothing. We will find a teaching of full and undeserved forgiveness and love. We will find a teaching that declares with authority that God is for us, not against us.

## 2.

But Satan does not want us to get off the hook that easy.

“Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue. It cried out, ‘What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’”

How many schemes of the devil are here! Where do we start?

Let’s start with the “just then.” How like Satan that is—lurking in the shadows when the truth is being taught. Martin Luther liked to say that when God builds a church, the devil sets up a chapel next door. Satan cannot stand to have Jesus simply teaching the truth uninterrupted, unhindered.

What next? “It cried out.” Winston Churchill once said that you should speak loudest when making your weakest point. The devil follows that rule pretty closely, doesn’t he? Even though Jesus taught in an authoritative way, his authority didn’t come from his method, but from his message. Its authority is the same whether it’s hollered in a yell or hushed in a whisper. So Satan needs to grip our senses. He needs to divert our attention with yells and smells, with sights and sounds. Perhaps some of you know people who, as much as possible, simply play video games all day so that their minds are always occupied with a different reality than reality, or maybe you know people who do the same with work, so that they don’t have time to be confronted with life’s most important issues. That’s what the devil is trying to do with his shouting here.

What next? “What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? What is your business with us?” Whenever we hear demons speaking in the rest of Scripture, they usually speak for themselves. Jesus met individual demon-possessed persons at other times in his ministry, and those individuals would ask him, “What is your business with *me*?” The only other times we hear them say, “What is your business with *us*?” are when there is more than one demon-possessed person or more than one demon possessing the person.

But here we have one demon possessing one person, and he asks, “What is your business with *us*?” What is he doing? He is aligning himself with the people. He is saying to them, “Do not listen to this man. Listen to me. I’m on your side. I can speak for you. I’m one of you. This man is not. He can’t relate to you. He is against you.”

And that’s exactly what he goes on to say, isn’t it? “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Mixing bold-faced lies with gospel truth, as he always has. “This teaching that you’ve heard, that you’re all amazed at, that speaks to your deepest questions and needs—it will destroy you.” And that’s what Satan has been trying to convince the world and us from the very beginning, isn’t it? “If you swallow this teaching, you will be forced to admit that you are helpless, that you cannot do it on your own, that you are weak, that God is supreme and you are not. Furthermore he will expect you to voluntarily refrain from doing everything that’s fun and to engage in everything that’s boring. That is no life at all. That is ruin and destruction.”

And after he has presented us with that line of reasoning, then he is all too happy to point out who Jesus is—the Holy One of God. “Do you see? The one who wants to ruin and destroy your life is none other than God himself. God is not good for you or to you. He is wicked and he is against you.”

So now it is time. It is time for Jesus to substantiate his word. To prove that his word does have authority. And how does he back up his word? With his word. “Jesus rebuked the spirit,

saying, ‘Be quiet! Come out of him!’ The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and after crying out with a loud voice, it came out of him.”

You see that Jesus would rather the truth not be spoken when it is mixed with damning lies. Though the devil has just clearly and truthfully articulated who Jesus is, Jesus cannot and will not stand it. He tells the devil to be quiet, and then he demonstrates for everyone, for us, that he has not come to destroy us, but to save us. He tells the devil to come out and forces him to reveal his hand. The devil shakes the man violently and comes out of him with a piercing, blood-curdling shriek.

“There,” Jesus is saying, “is that what you want? Is the devil really on your side? Does he really want what’s best for you if this is how he treats those under his control? Who is the one who really has come to destroy you? As for me, I have come to save you from the power of the devil. And my word, my teaching, is what does so.”

The devil doesn’t usually come to us through demon-possessed people today. But he comes to us in the form of every teaching without authority. He comes to us in every religious teaching that does not originate with Jesus. He comes to us in teachings that tell us that enlightenment can be found within ourselves. He comes to us in teachings that tell us that we need to devote ourselves to God to earn his favor. Any time any part of God’s word is called into question, you can rest assured that the devil has just made his entrance and is trying to shout over Jesus’s calm, authoritative voice, “This man is trying to destroy us, and he is God!”

But what does Jesus continue to do, friends? He teaches us his word, same as before, the only necessary weapon against the devil’s ravings. He taught us in our baptism when he came to us and drove the devil’s influence out of us. Many people misunderstand our teaching about baptism, as if we believed that the act of bringing a child to the font or water itself could somehow save us. But that is not what we believe. We believe that baptism saves us only and precisely because Jesus joins it to his word, to his teaching. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

And he continues to keep Satan’s shrill cries and protesting shouts far from us through his teaching preached, taught, and read, through his teaching joined with bread and wine. And what he gives us through that teaching is always the same—forgiveness, rescue from the devil and his tyranny, the certainty of peace with God and eternal life.

Be amazed at Jesus’s teaching. He teaches with authority. And he backs up his authority with saving acts. He drove the demon out from this man, and he crushed the head of the demon’s master on the cross. That’s a teaching worth being amazed at forever, and when we cling to it in faith, that’s exactly how long our amazement will last. Amen.