

January 28, 2024  
Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“One with Authority”**

“What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

People have asked me over the years if there are any sermons that I have preached that have been memorable, that stand out from the others. While there have been some sermons that I preached on notable occasions that I can easily call to mind, perhaps the most memorable sermon from my years in ordained ministry was a sermon I preached when I was not scheduled to be the preacher. It was on the occasion of an ordination service in a nearby congregation on Long Island. Our bishop was scheduled to be both the presiding minister at the ordination and the preacher, so my role was simply to serve as an assisting minister and welcome people to the ordination service in my role as dean of that conference. When the day of the ordination arrived, everything seemed to be going smoothly; it was a beautiful day, the sanctuary was packed with people from the congregation and the ordinand's family, there was a good representation of local clergy, and the smells from the Fellowship Hall promised a wonderful dinner after worship. All was in place – until someone noticed that the bishop had not arrived. While this bishop was not known for being early to any event, it was getting close to the starting time for the service and there were no signs of him. Someone had his cell phone, and when he was contacted, we were informed that he was stuck in traffic that was at a standstill and had no idea when he might arrive. I huddled with my clergy colleagues, and with the bishop's approval we began the service in the hope that he would arrive in time for the sermon and the ordination. We sang the first hymn, shared the Prayer of the Day, read the lessons – but still no bishop. We decided to sing another hymn in hopes that he might appear – but that did not happen. Finally, one of my colleagues approached me and whispered in my ear, “You're the dean – you should get up and preach.” And so, with absolutely no preparation, I got up in the pulpit and began speaking. It was really less of a sermon than a filibuster; I was pulling out everything I knew about being a pastor, how the Lord calls all of us through baptism to serve in Jesus' name, and what a privilege and awesome responsibility ordained ministry has been for me and my colleagues. I was running out of ideas when finally, I saw the bishop arriving in the narthex and being helped into his vestments. I said a quick “amen” and then chose a hymn while he came down the aisle and took his place in

the ordination service. I have never been happier to see a bishop than on that memorable day!

At the supper that followed the ordination that finally happened, a member of the congregation asked me why one of the pastors present could not have stepped in and presided at the ordination. I explained that in the Lutheran Church, only bishops have the authority to ordain. This practice is rooted in our understanding of ordained ministry as a ministry of the whole church, and it is the bishop as the pastor of the synod that represents the church in the ordination service. It is a practice that reminds us that we are stewards of the church's ministry whose authority is entrusted to us by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the one who came to serve God's people with authority.

In today's Gospel lesson, Mark continues his account of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus following his baptism in the Jordan River and his temptation by Satan in the wilderness. After announcing that "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near*" (Mark 1:15), Jesus invites two sets of brothers to "*follow me, and I will make you fish for people*" (1:17). The brothers "*immediately left their nets and followed him*" (1:18), a sign that there was something about the power of Jesus' words that led to this dramatic change in the direction of their lives. After accepting this invitation to discipleship, Mark reports that "*they went to Capernaum, and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught*" (1:21). Synagogues were primarily places where the Jewish people gathered for instruction on the Torah (many modern Jews refer to their synagogues as "schuls," schools for learning the Word of God). Jesus assumes the role of a teacher, a common way in which he is portrayed in the Gospels (his followers often referred to him as "Rabbi," the Hebrew word for "teacher"). When he offers his teaching in this synagogue, Mark reports that the people gathered there "*were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*" (1:22). Scribes in New Testament times were more than mere recorders of words; they often took on the role of teacher in the synagogue alongside the rabbis. They would have been persons who were educated and set apart for their ministries in the same way that pastors are trained and ordained in our churches today, entrusted with "*Christ's authority to preach the word of God and administer the sacraments, serving God's people as together we bear God's creative and redeeming love to all the world.*" (ELW Ordination Service). While they are often portrayed in a negative light in the Gospels, there is no indication that the people's comparison of Jesus' authority with that of the scribes is meant to denigrate their ministry; the people are comparing the scribes whose authority comes from the institution that ordains them with Jesus, one whose authority comes from within, who brings "*the good news of Jesus Christ, the*

*Son of God.*” (1:1). “Authority” can mean either the right or the power to do something, or both. While the scribes taught with erudition, Jesus taught with authority, interpreting the Scripture as one who has the right to say what it means. Instead of continuing with an example of Jesus’ teaching, Mark uses an exorcism story to demonstrate the authority of Jesus’ word. The setting of this exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue is significant because *“Jesus first publicly confronted and defeated the powers of evil in the place of worship of the people of God.”* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). Exorcism stories in the New Testament generally include an encounter between the afflicted person and the exorcist, the action of the exorcist, and the demon’s departure. Mark will include three more exorcism stories in his Gospel (5:1-20, 7:24-30, 9:14-29); summaries of Jesus’ activity include exorcism as a prominent activity that generated a following among the crowds (*“And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”* – 1:39). Jesus had already established his authority over Satan in the temptation story (*“He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him”* – 1:13) and in the immediate response of the brothers to his invitation to discipleship. The demonstration of his unique authority continues when he confronts *“in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit”* (1:23), a term that denotes an invisible spiritual being, neither human nor divine, alienated from and hostile to God. Such unclean spirits are seen in the New Testament as forces that seek to enslave people, in contrast to the Holy Spirit of God that is a source of liberation and empowerment from God. Whatever the nature of this unclean spirit may be, it is clear that this spirit immediately recognizes Jesus and the authority he possesses, crying 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”* (1:24). Without defining his nature or precise relationship to God, the unclean spirits recognize Jesus and tremble (*“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder.”* – James 2:19). Jesus has such authority that even demons recognize it and obey instantly. These demons prove more perceptive theologically than the human audience; they acknowledge Jesus’ status as the “Holy One of God” and that his coming marks the end of their own domination over human beings. The end of demonic power is a sign that the present evil age is coming to an end:

- “And when that agitation took place, the saints out of heaven perceived it; the pillar of the earth shook from its foundation; and the sound was heard from the extremities of the earth into the extremities of heaven at the same time. Then they all fell down, and worshipped the Lord of spirits.” – 1 Enoch 55: 4-5.

While the crowd sees Jesus as a powerful miracle worker who possesses unique authority, they do not yet recognize that he is the Son of God. While the demons can recognize this power, this recognition fills them with fear because it is a sign that their reign of terror over human beings is coming to an end. This happens when “*Jesus rebuked them, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’*” (1:25). A rebuke is a form of censure, warning, or prohibition. It figures prominently in the exchange between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi (“*But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’*” (8:33)). Jesus’ rebuking of the unclean spirit is also a sign of his authority, for as soon as he commands it to come out of the man the spirit is possessing “*the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him*” (1:26). The swift, violent reaction of the demons proves the truth that Jesus is the “Holy One of God.” The focus of the story remains the divine authority exercised by Jesus.

- “The forces of evil knew of the healing power of Jesus’ word; they are not submissive or indifferent. Jesus’ powerful teaching not only is fresh to the ears of the faithful, but it also disrupts the undisturbed presence of evil. Evil discovers that it is running its course.” – Ofelia Ortega.

Mark reports that the crowd is amazed by this demonstration of authority and power: “*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.’*” (1:27). The word “new” (*kainos*) refers to what is unprecedented or previously unknown. Jesus’ teaching is made known not only in words but in action; the crowd sees this action as a sign that a new religious leader has appeared, one who has authority over even the unclean spirits who possessed this man who has now been liberated from these enslaving forces. As a result of this event, Mark reports that “*at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee*” (1:28).

While many have speculated as to the identity of the “unclean spirit” and how we might interpret it in our modern age, the focus of this story is not on the identity of the spirit but on Jesus’ act of rebuking the spirit so that it is no longer a source of enslavement for the man. It is a reminder that the authority that Jesus demonstrates in the Capernaum synagogue is the authority to fulfill the purpose of God in his proclamation that “*the kingdom of God has come near,*” a kingdom in which God’s reign of love, joy and freedom replaces the kingdoms of the world that seek to dominate and enslave their subjects. Luther’s teaching on the Second Article of the Creed emphasizes that Jesus bears the full authority of God for the purpose of freeing

God's people so that they might enjoy the abundant life that is God's purpose for all of creation and humanity:

- "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."

Jesus' authority is unique because, unlike those who are ordained and entrusted with the authority to preach and teach the Word of God, Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate, the one who is "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14). As those entrusted with authority by the church are charged to be faithful stewards of such authority, only using it for the purposes for which it was intended by the Lord of the Church, Jesus also demonstrates that he understands that the authority he possesses is not something to be misused for his own desires but is to be used for God's purpose of liberation of God's people. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was the occasions when Satan attempted to entice Jesus to misuse this authority; but three times he resists the power of Satan's enticements so that he might use his authority as the Lord and Saviour of all. When the crowds take on the role of Satan in tempting him while he suffers on the cross to misuse his divine authority once again, Jesus again resists such temptation: "*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!'*" (15:29-30). An early hymn of the church that Paul quotes in his letter to the Philippians summarizes how Jesus resists the temptation to exploit or misuse his authority so that he might fulfill God's Will in his death and resurrection:

- "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under

the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” – Philippians 2:5-11.

While I did not have the authority to ordain my new colleague on that memorable afternoon on Long Island, I did have the authority to preach – even though it was a sermon I was not prepared to share on that occasion. As a pastor, I have been ordained to preach God’s Word, administer the sacraments, and serve so that it may be known that *“we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe”* (Augsburg Confession, Article V). My authority to preach and teach has been entrusted to me by the Church, and it is my responsibility to be a faithful steward of this trust so that it is God’s Word that I proclaim and God’s Will that I seek to fulfill, not my word or will. It is a trust that is given to all of us in baptism, when we are called to renounce the forces of darkness that seek to draw us away from God and enslave us in their demonic snares so that we might be free to *“serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days”* (Luke 1:74-75). The one with authority entrusts that authority to those he calls as apostles, so that we may confess that *“we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.