

Epiphany 4B: Mark 1:21-28  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Showdown at the Synagogue**

For more than 150 years of American presidential history, no one was particularly interested in a president's first 100 days. That changed, however, during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Elected in 1932, during the Great Depression, Roosevelt moved quickly to make significant and quick changes to economic and social policy. On taking office, he summoned the U.S. Congress to a three-month special session and, by the end of his first 100 days, Roosevelt had passed 76 new laws, mostly aimed at easing the effects of the Depression. Those first 100 days set the tone and direction for the rest of Roosevelt's presidency. Since then, U.S. presidents know they will be judged by how ambitious and successful their first 100 days in office are. With Trump, for example, those 100 days were spent withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, permitting the Keystone XL Pipeline, advancing the construction of a wall on the southern border, and nominating Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. For Biden, he spent the first days of his presidency signing a flurry of executive orders (42 in total, more than any other president) aimed at addressing the pandemic and undoing many of Trump's signature policies. In both cases, what they did in their first 100 days gave us a sneakpeek at what the rest of their presidency would be about.

The same idea applies to Jesus' ministry. As with the first 100 days of the president's term, what Jesus does first in the accounts of his ministry set the direction for how he will conduct the rest of his work. The Gospels are stories after all, and the gospel writers are storytellers and they want people to know who Jesus is. So it makes sense that they would want the first major event of their accounts to give us insight into Jesus' mission and character, as a kind of foreshadowing for what we're going to see later. In Matthew, you'll recall, Jesus is a teacher and lawgiver like Moses. And so, the first thing Jesus does there is give the Sermon on the Mount. In John's gospel, Jesus is the wonder-worker, the one who creates unexpected and unimaginable abundance at the Wedding in Cana, turning vast amounts of water into wine. In Luke, Jesus is the Prophet, who starts off his ministry by proclaiming release to captives, healing the sick and infirm, and announcing good news to the poor and the Lord's favor to all. And in Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry...*by picking a fight with a demon*, or rather with an unclean spirit.

As Mark tells it, it was the Sabbath, and Jesus was at the synagogue in Capernaum. He was preaching and teaching, and people were impressed, for he taught "as one with authority," an authority that came from within. But then all of a sudden, a noise erupts from the crowd. A man comes forward hollering at Jesus. Well, he looks like a man, though he doesn't sound like one, but rather something different, something otherworldly, something evil. "Whaaat do you have to do with usss, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to wipe ussss out already!? I know who you are...you are the Holy One of God!" But Jesus is having none of it. He tells the ...creature...to "be silent and come out." The man convulses and shrieks one last time, and the unclean spirit...is gone. And the man, he's silent, empty, freed. Those who were there that morning were already

impressed by Jesus's teaching, but now they are amazed, shocked. The Greek word means literally their "minds were blown," because even unclean spirits have to obey Jesus' authority!

Now, why do you suppose Mark has *this story* right at the beginning of Jesus' career, as the first event in his ministry? What, do you figure, is it supposed to tell us about Jesus? If we compare Mark to the other gospels, it's clear that in Mark's eyes, the most important thing to understand about Jesus isn't that he is a teacher, a wonder-worker, or a prophet. He is rather an exorcist, who has come to confront all the forces that are opposed to God, all the powers in the world that prevent us from having the freedom, joy, and goodness that God intended for us.

And, boy, doesn't that sounds great—God wants you to be free, to be happy, to break down all the barriers to our success. Some preachers might preach this passage that way, as Jesus freeing us to live our best life now. But success is not the point here. Nor should we imagine that being released from the forces that bind us is a simple matter of following "ten easy steps" to happiness. Mark is clear, those forces, those spirits, those destructive patterns of thinking ...they won't give up their territory easily. It requires confrontation, messy confrontation. And that can be, frankly, disruptive.

We today can easily forget that. You and I come to this story some 2000 years after it happened, with the legacies of a thousand years of Christendom, where Christianity and Jesus were woven into the culture and society. And we live in a country where (until recently) Christianity was the norm, the status quo, conventional, maybe even somewhat outdated. In which case, it's only surprising that anyone would still believe it is true. What this story tells us, shows us, though, is that Jesus, when we take him for what he is, is anything but conventional. For Jesus came not to compromise with evil or to make peace with sin but to disrupt things, to overturn the order. Jesus is disruptive, and the stories about him are disruptive. They challenge not only the way things are but also our assumptions, what we believe is possible.

Take today's Gospel lesson for example. At the center of this story is an *exorcism*, the casting out of an unclean spirit, a demon. To modern ears, stories like this in the Bible, of spirits and demons, are ludicrous, primitive tales from a backward, benighted people, rooted in superstition, not science. If they refer to anything real, we suppose they are about people suffering from mental illness, not people who've been taken over by an alien personality. And so, Jesus the exorcist becomes Jesus the psychiatrist, whose words are Prozac to unsettled souls.

Nothing against psychiatrists, but I don't think that does justice to the story Mark tells. Something else, something more profound happened that day in the synagogue. Jesus was confronting a power, not having a therapy session! To be clear, I'm not saying that we necessarily have to believe in supernatural entities in order to get something from this story. We certainly don't have to go in for the Hollywood portrayals of demonic possession with spinning heads and levitating bodies, in order to allow that there are forces in this world that are opposed to God's will, that invade our lives, our communities, our cultures and work to tear us down.

Even if we doubt the existence of supernatural spirits, we can still appreciate how people can be "possessed," taken over, by addictions or anger or jealousy. And we can understand how mental

illness, sexual abuse, and racism can wreak havoc on individuals, families and whole communities. And I think that there are belief systems, ideologies, that can be just as destructive. They capture people's hearts, their mind, blind them to the truth, to reason, and turn their victims into bitter, angry, violent mobs, unthinking, hysterical, lashing out at others. We may not call ideologies or addiction or abuse "unclean spirits," but that doesn't make them any less destructive or devastating. And whether we attribute to them actual supernatural agency or not, whether we understand them as demons or dark forces or personality disorders, whatever we call them, that's what Jesus came to oppose, says Mark. He came to confront those influences, to name them and cast them out, to free us from their oppressive power. He came, in a word, to *exorcise the world*.

But there is another layer, another dimension to this story. The confrontation with the unclean spirit, Mark says, happens *on the Sabbath*. Superficially, the mention of the Sabbath explains why Jesus was at the synagogue—the Sabbath is the day set aside for Jews for worship. But the Sabbath is more than just a day. For Jews, it is a symbol of all that God intends for his creation. The Sabbath, you'll recall, is the crown of creation in Genesis. The Lord worked six days and then rested on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the day when all is complete, when all is in harmony and peace, and everything is as it should be. In the Jewish religion, Sabbath stands for how things are supposed to be, how they *will be* in God's promised future—a future of rest and enjoyment.

So, when Mark says that it was the Sabbath, that has a greater significance than just noting what day it was. This is especially clear when you consider the phrasing Mark uses. If we translated the Greek literally, it would say, "And coming into Capernaum, immediately the Sabbath arrived and he taught in the synagogue." It almost sounds as if, when Jesus shows up, the Sabbath follows right after him. Which, if that is what is intended, is a powerful claim. Jesus brings the Sabbath. He fulfills the promises that God made to his people. He manifests God's will on earth.

And again, this doesn't happen, *cannot* happen without confrontation, without facing up to all the spiritual forces that oppose God, that resist the realization of Sabbath. There are always forces and authorities that are invested in the status quo, that benefit from their position in it, who resist change. Anyone who has started working for a company or a school or a church knows—if they don't know, they find out real quickly—that efforts to improve the organization, to make it better, will inevitably meet with push-back. But it's not simply that those in the organization resist change. The system itself, the organization, independent of its members, has a mind of its own, its own momentum, even, it can seem, its own agenda and desires. The "swamp," the derogatory name given to federal bureaucrats, is a perfect example of this. I'm sure those who work there are perfectly nice people, but taken as a whole, the bureaucracy is a leviathan that thwarts any and all effort to reform it. But the same thing can be said of universities, school systems, banks, businesses, even church denominations—any organization larger than a few people—can take on a life of its own, and worse can quickly become demonic, destructive to the very people they are supposed to serve.

Jesus in his ministry set his sights precisely on combatting evil on that level. As Paul explained to the Ephesians: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” That was Jesus’ mission—not to wage war on the emperor, his soldiers, or any person, but rather to take on the forces, the spirits in the world, the organizing systems we create that threaten to destroy us. Sin, death and the devil—those are the traditional names given to the powers-that-be, to the forces that are opposed to God. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, whether he was healing or teaching or exorcizing spirits or performing some other miracle, it was all aimed at disarming and dethroning these powers.

That assault came to a climax on the cross. All the forces of evil—the powers of sin (the jealousy of the Jewish leaders, the callousness of the Roman soldiers, the cowardice of the disciples), death (represented by the Roman Empire), and the devil, whose spirit entered Judas—they came together, conspired to crucify Jesus. They thought they could remove the threat he posed by killing him. But they didn’t understand that that was Jesus’ plan all along, to take that battle to the cross. The powers did their worst, but in dying and rising again, Jesus was victorious over sin, death and the devil, showing the powers to be *powerless*.

You’re probably thinking—That’s great and all, but what does it mean for me, for me and my life? What this means is that Jesus has authority, over not only our lives but all of creation. And there is not a spirit, a force, a power in our lives, *in the world*, that Jesus cannot overcome, that he has not already overcome on the cross. Jesus came to exorcize the world, to cast the spirits of evil down from their thrones and to cast them out of our lives. That may not be a way we normally think about Jesus’ mission, but it is a powerful and inspiring truth. We are not left on our own, subject to spirits, forces we cannot control but which want to control us. Jesus has come to break their power and to bring God’s Sabbath wholeness to our lives. What Jesus did that day in the synagogue, you see, that was only just the beginning. Jesus promises we will see even greater things than these. Thanks be to God.