

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/28/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany**

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, January 28<sup>th</sup>

**Mark 1:21-28**

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### Teaching with authority

The Gospel lection for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany makes many modern Christians uncomfortable. The mere reference to unclean spirits, demons, possessions, and exorcisms can quickly cause embarrassment, leading us to quickly move along to a passage that better agrees with our Enlightenment thinking (or arrogance?). Yet Mark inconveniently records an exorcism as the first public sign performed by Jesus. If we discount or attempt to rationalize this text, we miss something vital.

#### Mark 1:21-28 Commentary

Mark's Gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist (1-8), the baptism of Jesus (9-11), the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (12-13), the arrest of John and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (14-15). This lectionary text then follows immediately on from the call of Jesus' first disciples (16-20).

*<sup>21</sup> And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching.*

Capernaum became Jesus' home and the center of His Galilean ministry (2.1). It was a prosperous town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was also the home of Jesus' first disciples. We believe the concept of the synagogue emerged during the Diaspora since those Jews no longer had access to the Temple in Jerusalem. Eventually there would be a requirement that wherever there were at least ten Jewish families there would be a synagogue. The synagogue was a central institution of Jewish life. On the Sabbath, there would be prayer, reading of God's Word and the subsequent exposition and teaching. The synagogue had several officials, however, there was no permanent "teacher." The "Ruler of the Synagogue" was tasked with the responsibility of finding qualified laymen to teach and would call on any competent person. The synagogue was the ideal place to go if you had a message to preach (1:14-15) and Jesus would be the ideal person to call on, at least early on in His ministry before too much controversy had developed.

*<sup>22</sup> And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.*

Since the Law was ultimately given by God, it required careful and meticulous study, interpretation, and application to life. This requirement gave rise to a class of people known as the scribes who were experts in the Law. Their responsibility was to interpret the Law into moral principles (which ultimately led to an almost endless

set of rules), to teach the Law and to provide judgment in individual situations. Like today, there were some differences in interpretation among the experts. The typical form of teaching would reference which rabbinical school of thought was being referred to. The scribe would have no personal authority but merely reference the teaching of the great experts of the past. Any independent judgement would be cautiously given at the end. The purpose of being a disciple of a rabbi was to completely emulate the master and such a disciple would be forever “yoked” to the interpretations of his teacher. Jesus, on the other hand, did not need to reference any other authority. The Greek word *exousia*, translated “authority” in v.22, is typically used in the Bible for God’s own authority. Jesus spoke as though He was God Himself – which funnily enough...

*<sup>23</sup> And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, <sup>24</sup> “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.”*

Radical teaching on its own is not enough. Jesus’ teaching immediately provokes a confrontation with Satan. The demon apparently speaks for his fellow demons (“us”). The evil spirit or demon recognizes Jesus for who He truly is. The demon also acknowledges the ultimately power of Jesus – “*Have you come to destroy us?*” Some argue the demon naming Jesus was an attempt to gain control of Jesus since the belief at the time was knowing a person’s true identity and being able to call out their name would give you power over them.

*<sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.*

Jesus was having none of that. Jesus demonstrated His authority over the demon. The unnamed man’s life was transformed as a result.

*<sup>27</sup> And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” <sup>28</sup> And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.*

Such a performance would no doubt have livened up the typical Sabbath experience in the synagogue. The onlookers were astounded. Not surprisingly, what they had just witnesses provoked questions and the news spread (“*news*” is perhaps a better rendering than “*fame*”).

### Reflection and Action

The first account in Mark of a public sign of Jesus is an exorcism. There are three more in this Gospel (5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). To many modern Christians who have their feet firmly planted in the Enlightenment and perhaps unknowingly have biased themselves to a completely naturalistic interpretation of Scripture, the mere mention of demons, evil spirits, and exorcisms is about as welcome as the proverbial skunk at a lawn party. Unfortunately, the typical back-pedaling and contorted attempts to rationalize this account as a healing of mental illness can cause us to miss the real point.

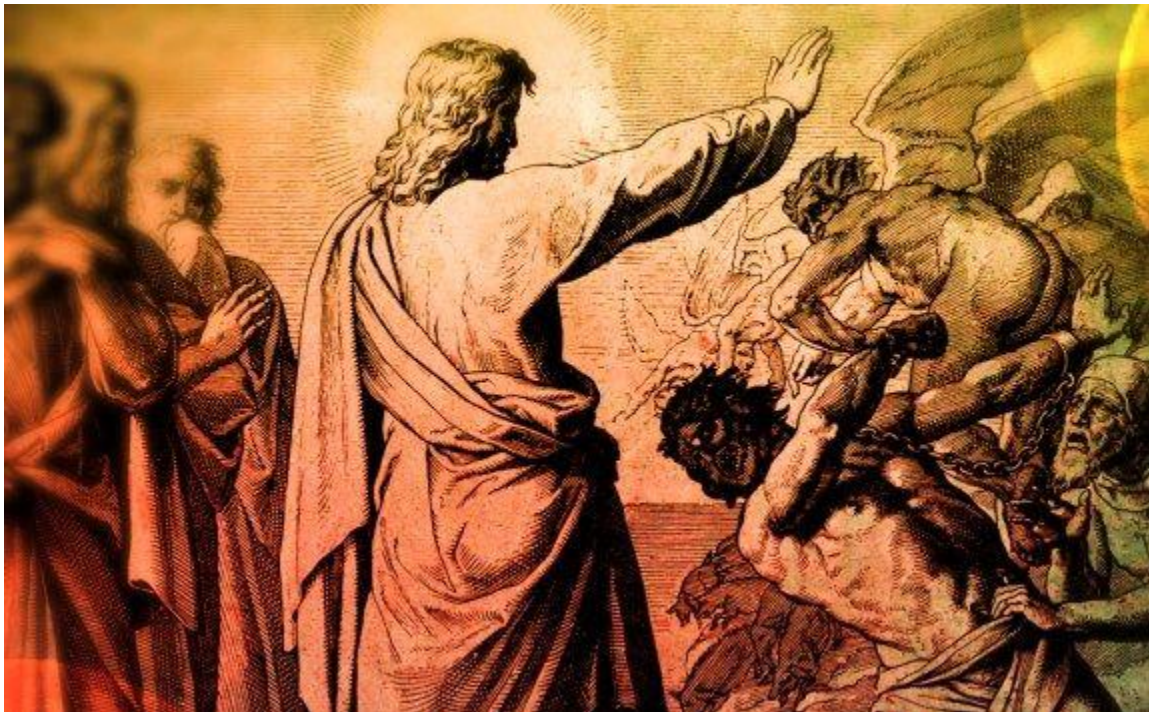
It is fair to assume the man with the unclean spirit would not have much of a history of visible possession otherwise he would not have been allowed in the synagogue. Afterall, other than cellphone interruptions, nothing will ruin a Bible study quicker than a demon-possessed student screaming and convulsing on the floor. Perhaps this demon-possessed man had been in regular attendance on the Sabbath. If that was the case, the demon was quite happy to sleep through the normal proceedings – in other words, scribal teaching of God’s Word did not provoke the demon. Perhaps it was not just the demon asleep.

Jesus’ teaching was not just a welcome breath of fresh air to that of the scribes, the authority of Jesus’ teaching was unmistakably demonstrated. Jesus, the living exegesis of God’s Word (John 1:18; 12:49-50), confronts a man

imprisoned by evil and transformed his life. Jesus' teaching through the power of the Holy Spirit continues to free people from the clutches of whatever has them imprisoned and transform lives today.

This text also reminds us that Jesus Christ is the living exegesis of Scripture. By the middle ages, most clergy did not study Scripture but learned about what expert theologians of the past wrote about what earlier expert theologians wrote about what even earlier expert theologians wrote about Scripture. Like the scribes, this process over an extended time led to a significant drift away from the original Scriptures and began to emphasize what humans said. The Reformation was a time when there was a move back to the original sources and the study of the earliest Hebrew and Greek autographs. This process identified many flawed teachings.

As the Scriptures were eventually translated into local languages, it became possible for the average person to read the Scriptures themselves. Half a millennium later, the many different ideas about interpretation have led to the existence of over 30,000 different Christian denominations. Today there are many growing movements within the overall umbrella of Christianity that have clearly distorted the teaching of Jesus. Many adherents are completely unaware that such doctrines are based on flawed interpretations. Paul noted how the Berean Jews were more noble since they tested what he said against Scripture (Acts 17:11). We must be like the Berean Jews and always compare everything against the teaching of Christ revealed in Scripture using the wisdom of the Holy Spirit captured in the many confessions and traditions of the church as a guide. No wonder there are so many warnings of false teachers in Scripture.



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