

Epiphany 4

January 31, 2009/Redeemer Lutheran Church – Succasunna, NJ
February 1, 2009/Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Mark 1:21-28

Last week we heard the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He called the first disciples, and began to preach around Galilee, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."¹

Today's Gospel text centers around Jesus teaching and preaching in Capernaum. We're told that Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. We're also told that the people "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."²

The scribes in Jesus' day were originally people who copied the scriptures. They became experts in the law. Their authority came from a detailed understanding of the scriptures and tradition. Their *teaching* usually consisted of reciting the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic. Their *authority* rested on their ability to recite the tradition that had gone before them.

Here's a traditional Jewish story that might help explain this:

Usually the orthodox rabbis of Europe boasted distinguished genealogies, but Rabbi Yechiel of Ostrowce was an exception. He was the son of a simple baker and he inherited some of the forthright qualities of a man of the people.

Once, when a number of rabbis had gathered at some festivity, each began to boast of his eminent rabbinical ancestors. When Rabbi Yechiel's turn came, he replied gravely, "In my family, I'm the first eminent ancestor."

His colleagues were shocked by this piece of impudence, but said nothing. Immediately after, the rabbis began to expound Torah. Each one was asked to hold forth on a text culled from the sayings of one of his distinguished rabbinical ancestors.

One after another the rabbis delivered their learned dissertations. At last it came time for Rabbi Yechiel to say something. He arose and said, "My masters, my father was a baker. He taught me that only fresh bread was appetizing and that I must avoid the stale. This can also apply to learning."

And with that Rabbi Yechiel sat down.³

We're not told exactly *what* Jesus taught. But obviously, to the people who heard Jesus, his teaching was not like the stale old bread of the scribes – a simple rote recitation of scholarly learning throughout the ages. Jesus' teaching was to them fresh bread.

I think there's a reason we're not told *what* Jesus taught. That reason is that it wasn't so much about *what* Jesus taught, as it was about *how* he taught. We're told that he taught with authority.

But what's more, it's not even so much about *how* he taught, with authority. We, as readers of the Gospel, know where Jesus got his authority from, what made his teaching special. We know something that those people listening in the synagogue didn't know. We know that Jesus' teaching was fresh and new, and with authority, not because of *what* he taught, but because of *who* he is: the Holy One of God.

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So now we finally turn to the second part of today's text. We're told that there was a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. We're not told that he, himself, was unclean – we're told he had an unclean spirit.

And it is this unclean spirit – or spirits, we might more appropriately say – that stands up to challenge Jesus. He says, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”⁴ or, more literally translated, “What to us and to you?” meaning, “How are we alike?” There’s nothing in common between us. The implication is that there is nothing in common between the unclean spirit and Jesus.

And he goes on to say, “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”⁵ So while the listeners in the synagogue recognize Jesus as one who teaches with great authority, it is only this unclean spirit who recognizes Jesus for who he truly is! He is the Holy One of God. The kingdom of God coming near, in the person of Jesus.

And so we learn that Jesus’ authority is not like that of the scribes not only because Jesus doesn’t teach like the scribes, but we learn the true identity of Jesus from the unclean spirit in their midst, the member of the demonic realm who is in direct opposition to Jesus and all he stands for.

And yet, it’s not time for everyone to know the fullness of who Jesus is. In the Gospel of Mark, this is a great secret. Only us, the readers, and the demons in opposition to Jesus, are privileged to know his true identity. Even the disciples don’t really get it until the crucifixion. It’s a secret. So Jesus rebukes the spirit, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”⁶

And note: Jesus doesn't use any of the traditional forms of invocation for an exorcism when he healed this man. Anyone who's seen the movie "The Exorcist" knows what such a traditional form might look like. For us Christians, the form is something like, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to be gone!" In Jesus' day, one might have said something like, "In the name of the Holy One of Israel, I command you to come out of him!" But Jesus didn't have to use any such invocation of power to command healing. Jesus, himself, was the power of healing. Jesus didn't have to call upon God to perform miracles; Jesus *was* God.

But even this healing miracle wasn't enough for the people to understand who Jesus truly was. Notice, they were astonished before this confrontation even took place. And afterward, they remained amazed. But like most of the miraculous healing stories we read in the Gospels, this healing did not produce faith in the people. They just went on thinking that Jesus was some great, new authoritative teacher and did not recognize him for who he truly was.

If we understand the context in which Jesus lived, this might be more understandable. For you see, Jesus wasn't the only miracle man running around the country in those days.

For instance, there was Honi HaM'agel, also known as Honi the Circle-Drawer, a miracle man from the first century before Christ. Honi "was famous for his ability to successfully pray for rain. On one occasion when God did not send rain well into the winter (in the geographic regions of Israel, it rains mainly in the winter), he drew a circle in the dust, stood inside it, and informed God that he would not move until it rained. When it began to drizzle, Honi told God that he was not satisfied and expected more rain; it then began to pour. He explained that he wanted a calm rain, at which point the rain calmed to a normal rain."⁷

And so, the secret of the identity of Jesus remains between us, the readers, and the demons whom he cast out.

I suppose the challenge of this story for us gathered here today is: Can we, like those who heard Jesus first-hand, be astonished that He has come among us? Can we be amazed that the kingdom of God has drawn near? We who know who Jesus truly is have all the more reason to be astounded and amazed. Our modern minds, however, attempt to dismiss stories such as the one in today's reading. We attempt to reason away the possibility that a person could actually be demon-possessed by saying that, well, in fact, the man probably wasn't demon-possessed at all; he was just suffering from some physical ailment, probably epilepsy.

And yet, even if we bracket out this story entirely from this text, we're still left with the fact that the people were astonished by Jesus' teaching. We're told it wasn't the same old stale bread that the scribes were peddling; it was fresh bread that fed their hungry souls.

Perhaps "it's in worship that we are closest to the atonishment on which our faith is based, the astonishment that comes with confrontation with Jesus as the Christ, God in the Flesh as this Jew from Nazareth."⁸

William Willimon, Bishop of the United Methodist Church, tells the following story:

When I was a young pastor I decided to find out what people really got out of a sermon. So at the end of a service, after I had preached, I had a young acolyte hand out to random people, as they were leaving the church, a sheet of paper. The paper had one question on it: What idea do you remember from today's sermon?

Well, the results were depressing. Few of the papers returned could remember even one idea from my sermon. And some of the papers, when they listed an idea, listed the wrong idea! They listed ideas that never even appeared in my sermon!

I was disheartened. I was discussing this with a wise women in our congregation and she asked me, “Where did you get the idea that a sermon is about ideas? Everybody knows that the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and to be amazed that he hasn’t given up on us yet.”

And I knew immediately that she was right. You come here, not so much to receive information or instruction. You come here to be astonished.⁹

And so, brothers and sisters in Christ, as we prepare our hearts to meet Jesus once again in the bread and wine of communion, I hope you’re astonished. I hope you’re amazed not only at the man who was a great teacher and miracle-worker, but moreso at his true identity. The Son of God who comes to us, week after week, to feed us with the fresh bread of his life. His life that was given for us, so that we may be privileged to be adopted into his family and call him not only brother, but also Lord and Redeemer.

Amen.

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¹ Mark 1:15

² Mark 1: 22

³ Nathan Ausubel (ed.), *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1989), 51.

⁴ Mark 1:24

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mark 1:25

⁷ *Honi HaM'agel* from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honi_the_Circle-Maker, downloaded 1/31/2009.

⁸ William Willimon, “Astonishment” in *Pulpit Resource* (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, Inc., 2008), 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*