

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1: 21-28

We learn about Jesus through stories. Like the main character of a story, we learn of him through observations of others, through his actions, and people's reactions. In this story from the gospel of Mark, the other characters are developing their own understanding of Jesus even as we are. It is an emerging picture. This is a very different approach than presenting Jesus through creed. Given how theologically focused the church became eventually, particularly from Constantine on, it is interesting to note that the gospels do not present Jesus in this creedal way, delineating the key aspects of Jesus' human and divine nature in philosophically integrated bullet points with proof texts, and the Christian life in a list of principles. If Mark started telling us about Jesus' divine nature as a philosophical debate, it would have a very different feel. Because in the gospels, we learn of Jesus slowly through story, through encounters and perceptions, and how he triggers hope or expectations.

In Mark's gospel, we are building an impression of Jesus by being told of what John the Baptist said, and how Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, and how he spent forty days in the wilderness before starting his ministry, and how he started calling disciples. We are gaining a sense of him through story, through actions, through these experiences that all work together to present Jesus to us in this slowly emerging manner. Our gospel reading continues this. We are learning more about Jesus because he enters the synagogue and begins teaching and people respond with awe by the way he spoke with clarity and authority.

Mark tells the story very tersely, but if we were familiar with the times and culture, we would quickly get the sense. It was a normal sabbath, families had come in their normal go-to-meeting clothes, sitting orderly in their regular places, along the benches which lined the wall, or sitting on the floor. They sang their responses, stood as the scroll was brought to the pulpit, and listened as the holy scriptures were read. And then Jesus begins to speak as a visiting rabbi would, the designated teacher of the day. He read the Torah, and then sat in the seat of Moses, sat as a teacher sits in authority, in the seat where the law of Moses is brought to light.

But he catches their attention. contrary to the average rabbi who went on and on about what this rabbi said, or what that rabbi argued regarding the days' scriptures, Jesus spoke with authority. He said what he thought, asserted what it meant; He brought it home, applied it to their time. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority." Jesus stands out amid other teachers. He is significant and we are starting to learn why.

And then the lovely Sabbath atmosphere is interrupted as one man started shouting rudely at their guest, garnishing a room full of gasps. It seemed unprovoked to any observer. Why is this person going off on their guest? What has triggered them?

Mark says it was a man with an unclean spirit. And for some reason we may be quick to imagine that all of a sudden some haggardly looking man with torn clothes and foaming at the mouth appeared. But perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to assume that "demons" only live in the destitute-looking; they can easily dwell in those more put-together. It is more likely that it was one of the normal-looking worshippers who all of a sudden went on the loose. A demon, again we are told, who started to feel threatened. And as some do, when they feel uncomfortable or threatened, they strike back, lash 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."

From a story-telling perspective, we get a new character here that knows something about Jesus that the other characters do not yet know. The demon is able to say things about who Jesus is that the others cannot authentically know or say yet. In fact, commentators have noted that in the gospel of Mark, it is only the demons and the foreigners who truly recognize who Jesus is. In this way, the demon hones in on two things that the others do not yet see. The first is that Jesus is far more than just a popular rabbi or political hopeful, he is the Holy One of God. He speaks with authority because he *has* power and authority. Having revealed this now, we will continue to watch Jesus interact with others, watching for how this plays out.

And the second is that Jesus' ministry will not focus on Rome and traditional politics about reclaiming sovereignty and exceptionalism and all those expectations that his ministry began to trigger. Rather, Jesus' ministry has power to address the inner realities, the ailments of the body, the fears and sin and demons that dwell out of sight. Jesus is bringing about the rebirth of hearts, and reshaping of lives, law written not on stone, but on the heart and soul.

The demon is alert to the fact, that though no one else in the synagogue that day knew what lied below the surface of this man, Jesus did. Jesus was not just concerned with ideas, and with correct worship, and outward good deeds. Jesus was also aware and interested in what lies beneath the skin, even in the depths of one's heart. So therefore, this demon normally hidden and safe, apparently felt exposed.

Mr. Vierhile was the first teacher that instilled a type of terror in me. It wasn't pure terror. I mean, he scared me, but there was also a level of theatre and drama and

humor not normal to the class-room as I had known it. It was kind of exciting, clearly memorable. He was old, round, a bit crotchety, had white hair and huge jewels that jiggled when he got worked up. He was not patient, he cut to the chase, threw out direct questions, would call someone by name and put them on the spot. The classroom became animated, you all of a sudden were learning what people knew, and that knowledge and the personal twists it came with was being added to the mix. It was kind of exciting. But it was terrifying for anyone shy of attention and spotlight, and who was afraid of being exposed for what I didn't know. When his eyes roamed the room, you wanted to disappear lest they fall on you. And God forbid you had drifted off at that moment and didn't know what he was even asking about.

When I went to community college, I had a similar professor for Sociology. Dr. Richardson. He was black, fiery, happy to stir up the pot, had us reading Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. And when he locked on me, it made Mr. Vierhile feel like a puppy dog, and the things I was ignorant of feel encyclopedic. One day a student next to me spoke a retort, an answer lobbed out of the professor's side view. He turned looking for who said it, and the student looks at me and says, "what did you say?" locking Dr. Richardson's gaze on me who now wanted to know more, and I stumbling over my tongue, not knowing anything.

An environment, a teacher, that is able to get at the things seldom said, little known, most often overlooked. To draw it all out and put it in play. Jesus is interested in all the stuff that lies under the surface, drawing it forward where it can be addressed. That is what the demon perceives, that is the implication of Jesus having power and authority. All the stuff of your heart, all the impulses, thoughts, feelings, resentments, and motives that have been unaddressed, these are now in play.

Now, I don't assume that lying under the skin of someone here this morning, is some hostile demon or spirit. But nonetheless, there is a lot that lives under our skin, and in the depths of our hearts that the average person doesn't see upon interaction; maybe a good deal that even our best friends do not see. We have quiet places in our hearts, secrets, hurts, or even "demons" in a metaphorical sense. These live in us, quiet enough that most do not notice, until something triggers that part of our story, our insecurity, or pain, or past, and we might react in some unseemly or uncharacteristic manner, even as this man lashes out at Jesus.

As we learn of Jesus through these gospel stories and his parables and teachings, we will learn that he is interested in our hearts and even our motives. And when Jesus starts working in communities, when Jesus starts working on the stuff long held under the surface, he will bring change. Now in our story, Jesus as the teacher does not put this student on the spot. Rather, it is the student, or the demon within

him, who puts the teacher on the spot. And perhaps in doing so, there is a third thing the demon reveals to us. That not only is Jesus the Holy One of God, or that he has actual power and authority, but that he will bring change to us. The status quo is not safe.

I occasionally reference family systems theory, an approach or perspective on how we function in groups that I have long found helpful. And in systems theory, the thing that is most terrifying and creates the greatest counter reaction is change; upsetting the equilibrium. Someone may look into our lives and see dysfunction, but our dysfunction is what we know. And if someone inserts themselves and starts muckin around, they now become the problem, and our defenses attack the one that is disrupting our world.

The demon sees it long before anyone else does, and he reacts defensively, confronting and calling out the changes that Jesus is able to bring. The other people don't fully realize it, won't for a long time. But the demon speaks it first, for those able to listen.

This little episode ends with the sentence: "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." That is when Jesus' fame took off; when they realized that Jesus had authority, not just to teach about ideas and behavior, but power to tame the unclean spirits that live under the surface, that don't die easy, and that tend to give us convulsions when someone gets too close.

In the end, I think this man was probably quite grateful, though the story doesn't tell us. It must have been freeing to not have that inner weight, that inner battle, that inner secret. Or maybe the patterns were too entrenched, and he just felt the terror, the threat of being exposed.

What Mark does tell us, is that the people were amazed. And rather than pulling back, they soon began to bring to Jesus all who were prone to convulsions, who needed healing beneath the surface. The religious leaders; well they weren't too happy. For one, they couldn't compete, and for two, they had other concerns in mind; they weren't too interested in meddling in the stuff of one's heart and one's demons, they were concerned with external realities; power and politics and such.

We love and hate teachers like Mr. Vierhile, or Dr. Richardson, or Jesus. They have the power to really change up our ways of thinking and being, but in doing so, they disrupt, and expose, and are interested in change. And we who come much later in this story, learning of Jesus as these stories have been passed down in writing and through tradition and worship, we are invited to grapple with what the demon knew first. That Jesus is not just a good man, a moral man, a good teacher, a good example. No. He is the Holy One of God who has power and authority. And

he knows and is interested in all that is intertwined in our hearts and our experiences. And if we let him, if he locks his eyes on us, if we do not let the terror of it get the best of us, he can bring change; healing, hope, possibility. It may strike us as destruction, but this change is actually healing and it is redemption. And while the demon states it outright, for most of us we learn it gradually, the realities of Christ slowly emerging. But the question remains – will we fight it, or will we embrace it, and let Christ do his work inside us.

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Man with an Unclean Spirit
(Lk 4.31—37)

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He^m commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

^m Or *A new teaching! With authority he*